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OR,

The Bighorn Valley Double Disaster.

BY WM. H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "YANK YELLOWBIRD," "BORDER
BULLET," "CENTRAL PACIFIC PAUL,"
"TEXAS TARTAR," "OLD DOUBLE-
DARK," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE ENEMY OF A GREAT PROJECT.

BIGHORN VALLEY had long been an object of interest to Western settlers and speculators. It had advantages which nature had not more bountifully bestowed upon any other locality in the far West. Gold had not been discovered in large quantities, though that species of mining had paid fairly well.

But what made Bighorn Valley so enticing was the fact that it was more or less rich in nearly everything that Mother Earth yielded in the area between the Father of Waters and the Pacific. Reports, more or less reliable, were to the effect that silver, coal, copper, slate and many other things were to be found in abundance, and to be had with next to no labor.

"HERE IS ONE OF THE TRIBE!" THE ROUND-UP DETECTIVE DECLARED, "BUT WHAT MEANS THIS JUGGLERY?"

The crowning glory of the valley, however, was the timber that covered every ridge and hillside—trees grand enough to arouse the profoundest admiration, and numerous enough to supply the market for many years to come.

"A valley of treasures," was the general comment of all who came and saw, yet next to nothing was done to secure the treasures.

A few persons had gone there and settled down to work, many of whom were solitary miners, and, finally, a collection of houses grew slowly at a desirable point. It passed the incipient stage, threw off the title of "camp," called itself a town, and had higher aspirations. Houses and other buildings were erected which were really fine. The best of timber, and the best of building-stone, were to be found in the valley.

Yet, the valley had a millstone around its neck, figuratively speaking; and it did not prosper as its natural wealth demanded. The reason was obvious. Pleasant as it was, its situation in regard to the rest of the world was simply abominable.

Capitalists, anxious to invest, gave up the idea when they saw that it was next to impossible to get the treasures—with the exception of gold—out of the valley. Imagine a tea-cup, with the town in at the bottom of the interior. There was the town in this case, and there the valley; and a rim of rocks ran almost around it, presenting a face so steep, so nearly impassable, that only human beings and sure-footed horses could pass the obstacle. Vehicles of all kinds failed to do it.

It was the fact that timber cut and articles quarried could not be drawn away with horses, and that even modern ingenuity could not build a railroad there, which caused capitalists to abandon all hope after a careful survey.

Thus things went on for years, and Bighorn Valley came to be well known by certain classes even in the remote East, and these men of the East lamented greatly, but a change was at hand.

Reports finally spread that there was a man with a scheme at Bighorn Valley. His name was Malachi Landgrove, and his plan was to tunnel the ridge and make a canal, the waters of which would ultimately reach the Missouri River, though what became of them was of no consequence; the scheme was to run boats sufficiently far to connect with the nearest station of the Northern Pacific Railroad.

It was a grand plan—on paper. Few men believed in it; nearly all laughed at it. The tunneling of the ridge, so that the water could flow through and bear boats with it, was a project which a great and wealthy corporation might undertake, but it would require a vast sum of money.

Those who laughed began to think seriously when they heard that the Red Lake, Sacred Comet and Missouri Canal—such was its resounding name—was really under way, and that many Eastern men had actually taken stock and paid in their money.

Then those who were not in the scheme were divided in opinion as to whether it was a wild, fruitless venture, or a deliberate swindle.

Months passed; work went on slowly; a year had passed, at the time of this story, since ground was first broken for the Sacred Comet, as the projected canal was commonly called.

There was a suggestiveness about the name which no one could fail to see, but its upholders declared that it meant, not that it would die out like a useless display of fireworks, but that it would reach a permanent blaze of glory.

It was a pleasant June evening, and Malachi Landgrove's residence made an attractive show to the eye. No other private property in Red Lake—that was the name of the town—could equal it. During the three years he had resided in Bighorn Valley he had not been idle. He had a large stone house, with spacious grounds around it that would have done credit to the possessions of a country gentleman of old England.

The trees seen therein had been standing when first the canal projector saw Red Lake, and they were as lofty as could be desired; while the ornamental shrubs, flowers, lawns, walks and minor features were due to labor and fertile soil.

From several of the windows of the house light shone forth, but the hour was so late that they were likely to go out soon.

In the garden, as the grounds had come to be generally termed, a young man was walking and smoking. For some time he had looked around curiously, as though a stranger to the scene, but this curiosity had been satisfied, and he paced a regular beat and appeared to be in deep thought.

The sound of footsteps aroused him, and he looked up in time to see a female figure rapidly approaching. Dark though it was, a look of recognition passed over his face. He stood still, and she came to him at once.

"Mr. Jeffords!"

"Yes!"

"I wanted to speak with you."

"I am at your service."

Her manner was agitated and her voice un-

steady; he was perfectly calm, and as noticeably courteous. He threw away his cigar, and stood in an expectant attitude.

"During the three days that you have been an inmate of Mr. Landgrove's house, I have been seeking an opportunity to address you privately," she added.

"The chance has come evidently."

"Mr. Jeffords, when you were introduced to me by Miss Landgrove, I thought, judging from your manner, that you believed we had met before."

"You thought quite right."

"Was the name, Mazette Duane, familiar to you?"

"Both your name and your face were familiar; as familiar, I may add, as was a part of your history, Miss Duane."

"I did not fail to recognize you."

"I thought as much—nay, I was sure of it. We recognized each other, yet neither explained the fact to Rachel Landgrove, and I think I may safely assert that she did not suspect anything whatever."

"You are undoubtedly right, and—oh, Mr. Jeffords, I am very grateful to you for keeping silent."

"By which I infer that you, too, have been silent since coming to Red Lake?"

"Do you suppose that if anything derogatory to me was known here I should be teaching French to Miss Landgrove?"

"By which I infer that she is immaculate."

"She is a noble girl!"

"I find no fault with her."

"It is not of her I would speak, but of myself. Thus far you have been pitiful toward an unfortunate woman. I want to ask you to continue as you have begun. I may be presuming too much, for, in the light of the past, I cannot expect you to think anything but ill of me; but, believe me, I am not here to do harm. Heaven knows I feel the utmost kindness toward all of Malachi Landgrove's family."

Mazette's voice still trembled. She appeared to be nervous to an extreme. Jeffords was cool to a degree just as radical; he acted with confidence and directness which indicated either that he was perfectly at ease, or that he felt capable of controlling the future.

"Am I right," he replied, "in thinking that you were as much surprised as I when we met here?"

"You are right."

"You did not expect to see me in the heart of the Rocky Mountains."

"No."

"Yet I am here."

"And I wonder greatly why it is so."

"Still, if I keep your secret, you will keep mine?"

"Gladly!"

"Then let the past be dead. Let no one suspect that we ever met before; never hint at the scenes in which we figured in the past—you, so strongly; I, only casually—and by no chance let drop a word which would show these people here what my business was in former days. Let me be to them what I am, Mark Jeffords, private secretary to Malachi Landgrove; and no more."

The speaker's voice had grown earnest, and it was clear that he was greatly interested in the result.

"I promise," Mazette returned, readily.

"Thus," he added, "there will be a band between us, and we can be friends—"

"Friends!"

"Why not?"

"You forget my past."

"I forget nothing. I do not belong to the thin-skinned portion of the community who see evil in even a butterfly, and cry, 'Crucify her!' the moment any one is accused."

"You are kind; you are noble!" the girl exclaimed, brokenly.

A sarcastic smile crossed Jeffords's face, but the darkness concealed it from Mazette.

"Thank you," he answered.

"I am very glad that you will allow me to remain in Mr. Landgrove's family. Here I have found peace, employment, a home, and kind friends. I should be glad to know that I can stay here for years to come."

"I'm not sure the family will hold together as long as that."

"Why so?"

Jeffords hesitated.

"Malachi Landgrove is not so young as he was," he returned, with manifest evasion.

"But he seems good for many years yet. I like him; he has been very good to me. But there is trouble on his mind now. You know to what I refer."

"No. Explain!"

"I refer to his unwelcome guest, Amos Smith. It is fast ceasing to be a secret, in the household, at least, that Smith is here on an unfriendly errand. A nephew of his, who lives in Brooklyn—which is Smith's home, too—has invested money heavily in the Sacred Comet Canal. When Smith heard of it he decided that the nephew was to be swindled out of his money; hence this trip to the Rocky Mountains. He has come, seen where the tunnel must go through, and pronounced the work an impossi-

bility. Worse than that, he believes more than ever that Landgrove has no intention of completing the canal, and that the whole thing is a swindle upon men in the East who can be induced to put money into the scheme."

"Mr. Amos Smith is a headstrong and violent man," observed Jeffords, carelessly.

"It makes me indignant to see his treatment of Mr. Landgrove. The latter has tried to convince him; has taken the man into his own house; has given every assurance that the canal will be pushed to the end; but Smith persists in his belief that the work thus far done is only a blind, and that, as soon as they can collect enough money from the 'dupes,' the projectors of the canal will flee to Canada."

"Meaning, I presume, Mr. Landgrove, Pome-roy Ash and Sidney Tillotson?"

"Yes; they are the only directors who live at Red Lake."

"Amos seems to be a dangerous man."

"He is. He won't be convinced— But, of course, you know all this as well as I do."

"One word, Miss Duane. You came here long before I did. What is your opinion of the Sacred Comet Canal Company?"

"I know it is an honorable enterprise."

"What is your proof?"

"Mr. Landgrove is not the man to engage in anything not honorable."

Jeffords shrugged his shoulders; the reply was about as logical as he had expected.

"You should talk to Amos."

"I hate that old man!" flashed Mazette.

"Why should he come here and spread the seeds of misfortune and ruin? He is rich and influential. Let him go back to Brooklyn and give an adverse report, and all the stockholders of that city, and of New York, will know it in a very short time. Ruin will follow!"

"I don't think Mr. Amos Smith will carry back that report."

"What will prevent him?"

"I, perhaps!"

"You?"

"That was an idle observation, of course," answered the private secretary, with a slight laugh. "Of course I have no interest in the matter, except that Mr. Landgrove is my employer. Yet, I am not sure that Amos will be allowed to carry back an adverse report; it would mean death to the Sacred Comet Canal, and we must assume that Landgrove, Ash and Tillotson, the resident directors, have all their money in the enterprise. They are laboring to convince Smith. Who knows to what a pass they might not go if mild measures failed? I am glad that I'm not in the Brooklyn man's shoes!"

"Surely, they would not harm him!"

"Harm him? Nonsense! Yet, I think you may be at ease, and think no more about the matter; Amos Smith will not carry an unfavorable report back to the East!"

"I don't know what is to prevent him—"

"I do!"

"What is that?"

"Why, he will be convinced. Arguments will be presented, so strong and convincing that he can't resist them. Why, he may be even prevailed upon to stay here, himself, to the end of his life, and be buried in our cemetery!"

CHAPTER II.

SMITH REMAINS DEAF TO ALL WARNINGS.

PERHAPS it was Mazette's fancy, but she thought that there was something unusual in Mark Jeffords's voice as he made this assertion. From the first there had been something significant in the way he spoke of Smith, and intimated that the Brooklyn man would never carry an unfavorable report back to the East.

More than once she had asked herself if, as Malachi Landgrove's secretary, he had gained secret knowledge and knew of facts which would prevent such a catastrophe.

The last words, however, made her shiver.

"Don't speak of death and burial!" she exclaimed.

"I won't," Jeffords calmly answered. "It was a random remark which was as unpleasant as it was vague. Let it be forgotten. As we have formed an alliance, I'll try to lead your thoughts in a channel less gloomy."

"Some other time I shall be glad to listen to you, but, now, I must return to the house. The last of the lights have disappeared from the upper part of the house, and I ought not to be out."

"As you will, Miss Duane. It is understood," he added, earnestly, "that we are to keep each other's secrets?"

"Yes."

"I trust much to you."

"And is it nothing that I trust to you?"

"I had forgotten that. True, true; our interests are mutual. I am glad it is so, and I would not ask for a better ally. I don't wish to make capital, but you are one in whom I feel a deep interest, for whom I have the kindest feeling."

"Thank you. I shall not forget your goodness."

"Now, you say you must go, so I will not detain you longer."

He extended his hand, and hers was placed within it without hesitation. He gave the

shapely member a warm pressure, and then, yielding to a sudden impulse, raised it to his lips. It was more like a leaf from past days than a typical act of the West, but, though darkness was around them just then, he knew that Mazette Duane was as fair of face and perfect of form as any woman in the Rocky Mountains, and she had not crossed his path without creating an impression which went beneath the surface.

They separated; she hurried toward the house. He looked after her thoughtfully.

"Beautiful and charming," he mused. "It's a thousand pities there is a cloud on her life, and I think now, as I thought when I first saw her, that she is naturally innocent. What she may have done under stress of circumstances, I don't know. Heat will change the hardest iron; bitter wrongs and misfortunes may crush the strongest tree of honor. There's evil enough in the world to stock the sun, the moon and the stars."

When the average man drops into philosophy he likes the accompaniment of tobacco. Jeffords drew a cigar from his pocket and walked down a shrub-bordered path, mechanically clipping off the tip of the cigar with his pocket-knife.

He was about to strike a match when the sound of voices close at hand stopped him. He had unconsciously followed almost in Mazette's path, and one of the voices showed that he had overtaken her. It was hers.

The other—he stopped short, and a wave of suspicion rolled over him.

It was that of Amos Smith!

Jeffords thought well of Mazette, but his acquaintance with her was limited. He was placed most peculiarly at Red Lake, and had important secrets to guard. Led on by his good opinion of the girl, he had said some things which he knew were rash. Just what he had said he did not remember, but it concerned the man from Brooklyn, and he suddenly was beset with the suspicion that Mazette had been a spy to lead him on to reckless remarks.

Yielding to the impulse of the moment, he made a few quick steps, and, screened by the shrubbery, placed himself where the new conversation could be heard distinctly.

Mazette was speaking.

"Indeed, sir," she was saying, "you cannot have seen me anywhere before, unless you have been West previously."

"You were never East, then?" Smith asked.

"No, sir!"

The reply was as unhesitating as, to Jeffords's knowledge, it was false.

"Humph!" Smith retorted, "your memory seems very short, but it is no more than one ought to expect of a dweller in yonder house."

"I don't understand," faltered Mazette.

"Every block of the building is a lie and a swindle!" declared the man from Brooklyn, intemperately. "It was built with—well, whose money? I know, if you don't! Further than that, all under its roof are living lies!"

"You fail to choose your language wisely, sir."

"No? Thank you for setting me right; such an incorruptible and truthful person may well pose as a teacher and critic."

Mazette ignored his sarcasm and bitterness.

"Surely, you exempt Mr. Landgrove from the harsh verdict you have given?"

"Surely, I don't!" retorted Smith, striking the ground with the cane he carried. "Landgrove and all his partners are knaves and swindlers; I have proof of that, and now I'm going home at once to make the fact public."

"You will do an injustice."

"Ha! so you defend them?"

"I know Malachi Landgrove to be an honest man."

"That proves his innocence. With such a witness to certify to his honor, he is scandal-proof."

"Mr. Smith, I beg that you will listen—"

"I won't listen! You must do the listening. Look ye, girl, I've just said that I've seen you before. I have! I saw the resemblance as soon as I set eyes on you, though I was some time in placing you. But I've done it now!"

"You must be wrong—"

"I'm not wrong. I saw you in New York, a prisoner at the bar in a city court-room, though what the charge was I can't remember. It don't matter; I don't care. What I do know is this: I'm going East to say to the people words to this effect: Old Landgrove, projector of the Red Lake, Sacred Comet and Missouri Canal, is a swindler; and, what's more, he has in his house a girl named Mazette Duane who was a New York criminal only three years ago. And I'll give dates to fit your case, and to fit the records there!"

Mark Jeffords was in a state of great indignation. All his suspicions had gone, but only to be succeeded by fresh anger against a man who had been the object of his enmity before.

Smith's course now was as unreasonable as it usually was. He had no cause to hate Mazette, and the affair should not have concerned him, yet, simply because she was an inmate of Landgrove's house, he intended deliberately to do her all the harm he could.

As for Mazette, she straightway made a mistake.

"In regard to myself I deny nothing," she answered, "but, surely, you will not keep your threat. I am a woman; I never have injured you. Let me ask, then, that when you go away you will not tell any one about me."

"I shall tell everybody!"

"But why?"

"You live in that house!"

"Yes; in order to earn my daily bread. I am not a relative or old friend of the family. More than that, Mr. Smith, I am a woman. As such, I ask for your pity and mercy."

"So!—you bend your proud neck!"

"I ask for mercy!"

"Good! good! One of them humbled already, and the others shall follow. Mercy? Get away from me, girl, for you'll live to wish you had. So you're a woman, eh? Ho! I like that! Why, if every woman in Red Lake should plead with me, I'd not abate one iota of my purpose. Tomorrow morning, girl, I'll tell your early story through this town; a week hence, I'll tell it in New York. Farewell!"

Speaking with the greatest vindictiveness he turned away, making haste to depart, but had taken only two steps when a strong hand closed over his arm and he was whirled around almost like a top.

"Stop, you scoundrel!" came in Mark Jeffords's strong voice.

Smith regained his equilibrium after a struggle.

"What! what!" he cried, furiously. "Who dares lay a hand on me?"

"I dare!"

"You? Oh, so you are the precious secretary, eh?"

"I am the secretary."

"Another viper of the nest!"

"I am not under discussion, but I want to say to you that you are a villain and a coward! To what an extreme will the malignance of a perverted mind not carry its possessor? You admit that yonder girl never has done you harm, yet you will harm her, simply because your temper is stirred up. And she is a woman, toward which sex all men should feel chivalrous good will. Oh! coward, coward!"

"Upstart! Beggar! Puppy!"

Smith sputtered the words, being incapable of coherent speech or formation of ideas, and again beat his cane upon the ground to emphasize his rage.

"You have come to Red Lake as a spy," added Jeffords, with concentrated vehemence, "and never was there a spy less fair. You have tried, not to get facts, but to make false evidence toward a certain point. From the first you were resolved to prove matters in one direction only, and, in the pursuit of your object, things that did not exist become items of evidence, and suspicions become facts."

"Oh, I expect you and all the brood to defend Landgrove, but I defy you all."

"Don't do too much defying, or you may live to be sorry for it," retorted the secretary. "But it is not of Malachi Landgrove I wish to speak. I want your promise to let Miss Duane alone."

"I won't promise."

"What harm has she done you—"

"She's a viper in the nest; that's enough."

"She has nothing to do with Landgrove."

"I don't care a rush-light whether she has or not. I'm going to let the world know her as she is!"

"Mr. Smith, you must be seventy years old. Is it creditable to you to feel so uncharitable?"

"Words, words!—empty words!" snapped the perverse old man.

"Mr. Smith," interrupted Mazette, pleadingly, "I implore you to have mercy—"

"I won't, and that's the end on't! Take yourself off, woman!"

"For once, your advice is good," agreed Mark, in an unnaturally deep voice. "Miss Duane, pray leave us alone; let me talk with the gentleman. I hope to convince him that it is to his interest to use some moderation in this case."

Smith answered with a sneer, but Mazette did not oppose her champion's plan. Quietly she turned and hurried toward the house. Once she half-paused and looked back uneasily.

"I hope they will not quarrel," she thought. "In their present mood something serious might come of it!"

CHAPTER III.

AN EXPERT WHO "ROUNDS-UP" MEN.

THERE was one resident of Red Lake who usually signed his name—when he signed it at all—as "James Ball, Sheriff of Bighorn Valley." He had been elevated to the position by the votes of the settlers in the Valley. His territory was not large, being confined to the town of Red Lake, and the camps known as Sulphur Spot, Ben Eldad, Trombone and Duck-bill Drift. The last four places, combined, did not equal Red Lake in population, so Mr. Ball's headquarters had always been at the latter town.

On the afternoon of the fifth day following the events in Malachi Landgrove's garden the

sheriff was seated in his office reading a newspaper clipping.

It was in the following words:

"There is no detective in the West who, by reason of his sagacity and uniform success, more fully deserves the meed of superiority than Reuben Marshall, better known as 'Rustler Rube,' the Round-up Detective." Originally employed upon the cattle-ranges, he came into light as a hunter of criminals through an accident. A detective was wanted where none was to be found. Marshall took the trail, and, at one and the same time, made a remarkable success and laid the foundation of his present greatness. Recognizing a natural gift for the work, he adopted it as a profession.

His sobriquet is easy to understand, and sprung into existence naturally—as a cowboy, he was, at intervals, called upon to help 'round up' the cattle of the ranges; as a detective, he never fails to 'round-up' the criminals he works against.

"Personally, Mr. Marshall is less than thirty years old, well educated, gentlemanly and honorable. Before he came to the West he was a law-student in Connecticut. Ill health forced him to abandon that calling, but he has here found a degree of matchless physical condition which fits him for anything and everything requiring muscle and endurance.

He is popular with all—all except law-breakers and criminals. To them he is a terror. His modesty is proverbial, and it is left to his friends to state what is a fact—that he has never lost a case."

The sheriff laid the clipping down.

"A strong recommendation, surely. I hope he will prove as capable as it says he is."

The office-door opened and a man of somewhat advanced years entered. He was gray of beard and hair, and his expression was singularly non-committal. It would be hard to read his character by his looks.

He closed the door quietly.

"Sheriff Ball?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir."

"Are we alone?"

"All alone."

"That's good. My name is Reuben Marshall!"

"It is?" quoth Ball, in surprise. "But," he added, after a pause, "I don't know you."

"Yet you sent for me."

"You don't mean you're the—"

"Detective?"

"Yes."

"I'm that man."

"But I thought the Round-up Detective was a young man—less than thirty."

"So he is; so am I. The fact is, Mr. Ball, in your letter you said that you preferred not to have it known that Rustler Rube was the detective on the job. I liked your idea, and, thinking that if I was to sail incog. at all, it would be well to make a thorough job of it, I got myself up in this disguise. Hence, I appear to you as Perkins, aged detective."

"By gracious! you've made a good start!" Ball declared. "Your disguise is perfect; nobody would suspect that you were a day under fifty-five. You see, to explain my motive, I thought that if it was known here that a bang-up detective was at work, it would scare the guilty man, or men, at the start, and make your work all the harder."

"Well thought of, sir. Well, I judge that the mystery is not yet explained?"

"It is not."

"The murdered man was named Amos Smith?"

"Yes."

"Who and what was he?"

"A rich man from Brooklyn, who came on here to investigate the Red Lake, Sacred Comet and Missouri Canal."

"I've heard of that project. Wild, isn't it?"

"No, sir!" declared Ball, with the loyalty of a man who wants to see his home acres get a lift in business life. "Here we are in a valley rich in all ways, but the sharp ridge that hems us in makes it impossible to do teaming over the hills, or to put a railroad through. Hence, the canal."

"I see; but if the ridge is to be tunneled, why not run a railroad through the tunnel, according to the usual fashion?"

"From the east side of the ridge to the Northern Pacific Railroad," explained Ball, "the distance is just twenty miles. The land is not high, but it is abominably rough and broken, and it would take an immense fortune to fit that land for railroading; so you see that great obstacles and expense would have to be met even after the tunnel was completed."

"Exactly."

"Luckily, however, there is a canyon which runs almost as straight as a string along the line we want to go. That canyon will be used. Now, it would be a capital place for a railroad were it not for the fact that when the winter's snow melts, and, also, during every hard rain, the canyon becomes a river from five to twenty feet deep. Now I think you can see why we propose to construct a canal, rather than a railroad."

"You have convinced me."

"Which shows you to be a man of sense. That confounded Smith was otherwise."

"Didn't he believe in it?"

"A nephew of his in Brooklyn, or New York, invested in Sacred Comet stock. The moment that old Smith heard of it he jumped to the conclusion that the whole thing was a fraud; that it

was not intended to construct the canal; but that the men here had hatched a conspiracy to get Eastern dollars into a Western swindle."

"Did Smith make himself obnoxious?"

"I understand that he *was* going back East to make an unfavorable report, though without a particle of corroborative evidence except his perversity."

"That would have ruined the Sacred Comet, eh?"

"Probably it would have been a severe blow."

"Death did a good job for the canal project, then."

"In one sense, yes; though the project could have withstood the fiercest light that might have blazed from the furnace of inquiry," asserted Mr. Ball, as loyal as ever to the Sacred Comet.

Rube, however, had made his first mental note; the death of a suspicious investigator had removed an enemy of the canal project.

This might mean nothing; it might mean a good deal.

"The enterprise is all right," added the sheriff. "Besides Malachi Landgrove, president of the company, two directors live here—Pomeroy Ash and Sidney Tillotson. Any of these men can't be touched by the breath of suspicion. But, Mr. Marshall, pray excuse me; I wander from the subject. You are here to look into the death of Amos Smith, late of Brooklyn."

"Yes. How did he die?"

"When he came to Red Lake, and made it known that he'd taken it upon himself to represent an Eastern stockholder in the Sacred Comet, Mr. Landgrove took him to his own house and showed him every attention. He was found dead in Landgrove's garden on the morning of the 25th instant."

"Murdered!"

"Killed with a knife; no doubt, instantly."

"What more?"

"I may say, nothing. The weapon has not been found, nor any trail; while as to his presence in the garden, it is not explained. He retired to his room at ten o'clock, the previous evening, and was supposed to be there, safe and sound, until his absence was discovered in the morning. Search led to the finding of the body."

"How long had life been extinct?"

"According to our doctor, ever since about midnight."

"Was the victim robbed?"

"He had left his money and watch in his room. It is believed that he had no other valuables, so we infer that no robbery took place."

"Have you no theory in the case?"

"When Smith arrived he complained at times that our climate and its advanced years did not harmonize. He was inclined to be chilly, and was not prepared for it. As a result, Mr. Landgrove loaned him a gray cape-overcoat which he usually wore of an evening when he went out, which he rarely did. He wore this gray coat at the time he was killed, and it suggested a theory. Was he mistaken for Landgrove? Everybody in Bighorn Valley had seen Landgrove wear it, while not over half a dozen persons, at a guess, knew that Smith ever used it."

"A point worth remembering. What more?"

"Nothing."

"You have no more discoveries, then?"

"None."

"I, however, am to put forth every effort to discover the assassin?"

"Yes; just as much as though Smith had been a decent man."

Mr. Ball was nothing, if not loyal. There was a possibility that Smith would have dealt Bighorn Valley a death-blow if he had lived, and even now he could not forget, or forgive, the man from Brooklyn.

"Name and describe the inmates of Landgrove's house," Marshall requested.

"First, Malachi himself—a man of scrupulous honesty, great talent and enterprise, rich, public-spirited, benevolent and amiable."

"Second, his daughter, Rachel—aged about twenty-one years. I should say. She's a fine girl in every way. She is educated, refined, intelligent, and not in the least proud, if she is a rich man's daughter."

"Third, Mazette Duane, said to be of French blood. She's about Rachel's age, and pretty as you please. She is teaching French to Rachel. Charming girl, too."

"Fourth, Mark Jeffords—a young man from the East. He struck here out of work, and, being handy with the pen, and an easy composer, he was engaged by Malachi to do his writing. He calls him his secretary."

"The other members of the household are Mrs. Sally Hooks, the housekeeper; Kate Graham, a female servant; and Levi Stevens, a man-servant."

"Are the servants reliable?"

"I think so."

"If Smith was killed for purposes of robbery, it was not done by the servants. Having taken the decisive step, they would not have left the money and watch in his room. Has the deceased man been buried?"

"Yes."

"What did your doctor say about the force of the fatal blow?"

"He said 'twas the work of a strong arm."

"Stronger than that of a woman?"

"Beyond doubt. What woman do you suspect?"

"I suspect no person, male or female, at present. Now, with your permission, I will go in your company to Landgrove's house."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERIOUS KNIFE.

MALACHI LANDGROVE had just returned home after a visit to where the laborers were digging away on the western end of the Sacred Comet Canal, under direction of Thomas Flanders, the superintendent.

The president of the company was fifty-four years old. He had always had the best of health, and would have been a young-looking man were it not that his hair and beard were gray to the extreme. He had a fresh complexion, and thoughtful, studious expression. His friends considered his facial appearance kind and noble.

Kate Graham, the servant girl, ushered in two callers. One was Sheriff Ball; the other was a gray-haired man who was plainly dressed in garments which did not fit his muscular figure any too well. Another noticeable thing was that his face was stoical and composed, giving no clew to what was in his mind.

Landgrove suspected his identity from the first, and was not surprised when, after greeting him, Ball added:

"Malachi, our detective has come. This is Isaac Perkins, of Denver."

The master of the house extended his hand cordially.

"I am very glad to see you, sir," he declared.

"I am glad to learn that I don't intrude."

Thus spoke Rube Marshall, but it was not in the voice he had used at Ball's office. One would have said that a very different man was speaking, and, indeed, he always felt like Isaac Perkins when he assumed that role.

To his last remark Landgrove made prompt reply:

"A guest has been slain almost at the door of my house, and I shall not feel at ease until his assassin is brought to justice. Mr. Ball has full charge of the case, as you are aware, doubtless, but I shall pay you something out of my own pocket."

"We will speak of that later. First, your story will be in order."

"Let a certain new discovery have precedence over all else."

Both Rube and Ball noticed Landgrove showed agitation and nervousness as he spoke the last words.

"What new discovery?" Ball asked.

"When I came in, a few minutes ago, my man-servant, Levi Stevens, came to me with something which, I fear, is connected with the crime. Smith was killed with a knife, as you are aware. Well, Stevens has made a discovery in Smith's room; he has found a knife tucked in under one edge of the carpet, so well concealed that he would not have found it if he had not moved the bureau which stood over the spot. This knife has red stains which arouse startling suspicions. I will show it to you."

Unlocking his desk, Landgrove took out the article named.

The knife had a flat handle and long blade, and was double-edged. It was a murderous-looking weapon, and the stains upon it were suggestive in the extreme.

"I wish to call your attention to a singular fact," Landgrove continued, rapidly. "This knife, if it is the one with which Smith was killed constitutes a mystery. The crime was committed in the garden. In order to place the knife where it was found, the perpetrator of the deed had to visit Smith's room afterward. Why should he do so? Why should he hide the knife where it was next to certain to be found?"

"Sure enough, why?"

Venerable Isaac Perkins murmured the words, and looked at Malachi as though filled with mild wonder.

"I can only infer that it was a plot intended to connect some one in this house with the deed," added the capitalist, with warmth.

"What could be the motive?"

"Hatred, probably. But who is hated? Who is the hater? Why was the knife put in Smith's room?—a step which makes everything so indefinite."

"I regret that the room was not closed to all outsiders until I came."

"We followed close in that line. Ball and I talked it over, and, as a result, the room was closed and locked. There are two keys. I retained one; the second I gave to Stevens, for I thought that you might come when I was absent. Ball said he would send for a detective."

"Then the room practically has been closed?"

"Yes."

"Why was Stevens in there?"

"His motive was simple. Smith was a man who liked comfort. When he arrived here he had no slippers, and could purchase none that suited him; so I loaned him a pair of mine. Knowing they were there, and being engaged in putting my room to rights, Stevens went for them. One was partially under the bureau, the

other wholly so. In getting them out, Stevens found the knife."

The Round-up Detective made no comments. The account he had just heard was plain and homely enough to be true, while, if false, it was burdensome enough to be anything but creditable to its author.

"What kind of a man is this servant of yours?" the detective asked.

"Honest, faithful and reliable."

"We will let the knife rest for now; it may be a very simple affair."

The ex-cowboy did not think so. He believed that it had a bearing upon the crime. Either it was the knife which had killed Smith, and had been put there by the guilty person, or persons, with a motive not yet to be surmised, or else the same parties had put an entirely different knife there to an end equally mysterious.

In any case, whoever put it there was worth investigating. If that person could be found, some one would be revealed who had knowledge of the murder, unless Rube erred greatly.

"Let me now have an account of Smith and the tragedy, if you please," added Marshall, courteously.

"Certainly. Mr. Smith came here to look into the Sacred Comet Canal. A nephew of his had bought some of the stock we placed on the Eastern market, and the old gentleman came to investigate. He had just finished his work and was about to return home."

"Did he think well of the enterprise?"

"No."

Very frank was Landgrove's manner as he made the acknowledgment, and his face betrayed no embarrassment.

"Couldn't you convince him?"

"I tried in vain."

"What was he doing in your garden at such a late hour, the night he was killed?"

"I can only surmise that he went for air, exercise, or something of that sort. He retired to his room at the usual hour, Stevens lighting him up. I did not suspect that he had left the room until, when called in the morning, he failed to respond. It seems that he did go out, met the assassin, and lost his life."

"I am told that he wore an overcoat which belonged to you."

"He did."

"Do you think that he might have been mistaken for you?"

"Such a thing is possible, but not probable. I cannot think of any human being who should wish to do me harm. I do not know that I have an enemy. Even if robbery was the motive, I do not carry valuables of any kind upon my person."

"You did not hear anything suspicious during the night?"

"No, sir."

"I would like to see your servant, Stevens."

Stevens was called. He was a man of middle age, plain, homely, fairly intelligent and rather prepossessing. He met Rube's gaze frankly, without any show of defiance, and answered all questions readily and simply.

Like his master, he declared that he had heard nothing unusual during the night, and that he had no reason to suppose that Smith had left his room, or met with foul play, until the morning of the discovery. In regard to the finding of the knife in Smith's room, he told of the matter as Landgrove had done, showing no confusion, answering all questions readily, and, when asked to illustrate, handling the fatal knife without emotion.

Rube next asked to see Miss Rachel Landgrove. She came, and proved to be a tall, finely-formed young lady; a semi-blonde; and a person to whom no one could deny the praise of beauty. She was graceful, lady-like and intelligent, withal.

She evinced some nervousness, but all her replies were satisfactory. She stated that she had heard nothing suspicious the fatal night, and her testimony was not important. Rube did not ask her to touch the knife, but, at his request, she looked at it critically. She declared that she had never seen it.

Next came Mark Jeffords, the private secretary. The detective saw a fair-haired young man to whom Nature had been kind. He was well-formed and muscular, and, manifestly, a man of the world. His expression was calm and strong, but, while not having that unpleasant, offensive quality usually termed "piercing," his gaze was observant and analytical. Clearly, he belonged to a rank in life above the average in intelligence and alertness.

He acknowledged his introduction to Mr. Isaac Perkins with a show of calm good will.

The questions asked him were about the same as those put to the previous witnesses.

"Mr. Jeffords, you live in this house, I believe?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were you here the night of the murder?"

"Yes."

"When did you see Amos Smith last?"

"At the hour of retiring, when I bade him good-night, as usual."

"You heard no outcry, or anything else out of the ordinary run, during the hours of darkness?"

"I did not."

"Were you in the garden during the evening?"

"No, sir."

"Then you retired at once when the family circle broke up?"

"Yes."

"Do you know of any one with whom Smith had trouble?"

"No. My acquaintance with him was very limited. Having no common business, we had but little conversation," calmly explained Jeffords.

"Have you any theory as to the crime?"

"Thus far, sir, I have not been able to form any."

"That is all, Mr. Jeffords. You may go now, and kindly send"—the Round-up Detective consulted a paper he held in his hand—"send Miss Mazette Duane to us."

The secretary turned, when Marshall called him back to examine the knife. Like the other witnesses, he pronounced it unfamiliar to him.

He then went out. At the end of the hall he saw Mazette Duane standing by the window, gazing out. She turned with a start as he approached.

"Miss Duane," he said, quietly, "you are wanted in yonder room."

She gazed at him in silence, but he saw the color recede from her face.

"It amounts to nothing, of course," Jeffords added, lightly. "The detective is merely asking several informal questions, none of which amount to anything. He is a simple-looking old man, and even the criminal might face him with coolness. It's a very matter-of-fact affair, you see."

"It is a matter of life and death!" exclaimed Mazette, in a husky, tremulous voice.

CHAPTER V.

WHAT MEANT THE AGITATION OF MAZETTE?

JEFFORDS looked at the girl with a troubled expression ruling in place of his recent calmness.

"Mazette," he answered, "you take this too much to heart."

"I am afraid to go in there!" she whispered, looking toward the room where the detective waited.

"Why, it's only to answer a few simple questions."

"I know, but—I am afraid!"

"Now, Mazette, this is not like you. You have abundant courage; exercise it now. Go and get it over with as soon as possible. Isaac Perkins is a plain old man; I should say, a stupid man. He will ask the most commonplace things. You won't be there over five minutes. Be brave!"

"Do I look brave?"

"You must!"

"I wish I was made of iron, but I'm not."

"But don't you see that the occasion is one of no moment? The detective is pursuing a mere form; everybody is questioned, and very kindly. Go in without a fear!"

Mazette pressed one hand over her heart, and Jeffords could well believe that that organ was fluttering as if it would burst from its prison.

"I will try to do as you request," she responded, and then, like one who would use a small store of courage while it lasted, moved swiftly to the room of torture and entered.

Jeffords gazed after and shook his head gravely.

"Poor child!" he muttered; "I am sincerely sorry for her. Sorry? Why, if I could bear her sorrows I would be grateful to the fate that shifted them from her shoulders to mine!"

Mazette came into Rube Marshall's view. He saw a girl prettier even than Rachel, not so tall, and plump of form as the partridge of the old expression is credited with being. Her dark hair was a rippling crown; her eyes were full of interest and mystery; her whole appearance was pleasing.

Rube noticed that she was agitated.

"Miss Duane," he began, quietly, "can you throw any light upon the late tragedy?"

"I? No, sir; I know nothing about it," was her reply, hurriedly made, as though time were short and precious.

"When did you see Amos Smith last, alive?"

"In the parlor, with the family. I retired before they did."

"Did you hear any cry, or strange sound, during the night?"

"No, sir."

"Were you in the garden during the evening?"

"No."

"You saw no stranger loitering around the house or grounds?"

"I did not," she replied, with sudden eagerness, a look of relief appearing on her face, "but—"

"But what?"

"There might have been," she added, confusedly.

"Why do you think so?"

"I did not look, so I should not have seen any such person, anyhow."

"Exactly," returned Isaac Perkins, placidly.

"This knife—did you ever see it?"

He brought forward the weapon. She gazed at it like one in a nightmare. The last semblance of color receded from her face, and her eyes had a look of terror. She could not speak, or move, or even shift her gaze. It was a striking, painful pause.

"Our ladies," spoke Malachi Landgrove, quickly, "are nervous and upset by this unfortunate affair. Miss Duane has not been used to rough life in the West; she's from the East, and quite unused to such excitement."

His voice had effect upon Mazette; it was as though a promise of protection and care had been held out to her. She rallied with unexpected readiness and turned to Rustler Rube.

"The knife is strange to me; I never saw it before," she replied, firmly.

"That is all, Miss Duane. You can go!"

She went—gladly! Her calmness again fled when she reached the hall. She looked around with eyes which were almost sightless for Jeffords, but he was not there. She laughed in a low, husky, unnatural way.

"It is over," she whispered. "I could not endure it again; I could not have endured it now only for him!"

No one heard the words. If they had been heard, they would have proved enigmatical.

For some reason Rube had neglected to call for the next witness, so Landgrove, himself, went out to summon Kate Graham, the maid-of-all-work. She was a young woman with square jaws and an expression almost severe. She gave no light in her calm testimony, and was finally dispatched to send in the one remaining member of the household—Sally Hooks, housekeeper.

She went, but returned with the report:

"I can't find Mrs. Hooks, sir."

"Isn't she in the kitchen?"

"She ain't in the house, nowhere," Kate replied. "I ain't seen her since I let in them gents"—indicating Ball and Rube—"though she was in the kitchen right afore that."

"Why should she go away?"

"Don't know, sir, I'm sure."

"The woman had orders to be at hand when wanted—"

"And," Kate interrupted, "when I seen the sheriff and that gent coming, I says to Mrs. Hooks, says I, 'There's the detective, or I'm a Jew!'—which I ain't, of course, sir."

"Mrs. Hooks did very wrong to go out, and she shall be told so. Watch for her, Kate, and send her here as soon as she returns."

"All right, sir!"

Kate went out, as calm, cool, airy and independent as if she owned the whole of Red Lake.

To fill this gap, Mr. Isaac Perkins went to look at the room lately occupied by Smith. He made a critical examination, but found no evidence there. Next, the trio walked out into the garden. The spot was pointed out where the deceased was found after the tragedy, but many feet had trod there, and the ground told no tales.

The detective looked the garden all over, walking slowly, with his hands clasped behind his back, and referring to shrubs and flowers he found by the way.

If Sheriff Ball had known as little about the man-hunter as Landgrove did, he would have decided that they had committed the case to a very stupid old man.

Thus far there had been no manifestation of alertness or genius.

Half an hour was thus consumed, and, just forty-five minutes after the first call for the housekeeper, they returned to the house. Nobody had yet seen Mrs. Sally Hooks.

"Strange!" remarked Landgrove, severely. "Yet, I think you lose nothing. I've heard her say that she could give no information in the case."

"Then why did she run away?" Ball ventured to inquire.

"Run away' is scarcely the right term; she has gone to make a call, doubtless. It's a queer time of day for such a thing, but Mrs. Hooks is odd, anyhow."

"We will let the matter rest for now," serenely observed the detective. "By the way, I am not so young as I was once, and must plead guilty to a love of comfort. Would it be asking too much if I requested you to put a room at my disposal, here?"

"On the contrary, I shall be glad to do it," Landgrove returned, readily.

"Can you give me a first-floor room?"

"Yes."

"Then I shall be glad to take it."

"Very well; it is all ready, and I trust that you will make yourself at home in all ways. Pray regard yourself as my guest, and make free with the house."

The detective expressed his thanks, and then said that he would go with Ball for awhile, but would return before dark.

The officers left the house.

"What do you make of it?" the sheriff inquired.

"Of what?"

"The case, of course."

"Like the surface of a walnut, it gives but little view of the interior. The formal begin-

ning I have made was necessary. Now, I know all the people in the house—"

"All but Mrs. Sally Hooks. Isn't it odd that she slipped out?"

"We don't know her motive. Are you acquainted with the woman?"

"No; though I have seen her. She's about fifty, I reckon, and not ill-looking. She has some education, and is well regarded here. She has been a trump card to Malachi, and has cared for his house and family in the best of shape. I have had a notion that she aspired to be the second Mrs. Landgrove, but I may be wrong. That's all I know about her."

"I am glad, Mr. Ball, that you were so secretive at the first. As long as you told no one that you intended to employ 'Rustler Rube, the Round-up Detective' so called, you give me a wider field of operations."

"How so?"

"To-morrow, there will arrive at the hotel a man who will claim to be fresh from the mountains where game is abundant, and hunting-suits, rifles, and the like, will give color to the claim. He will write himself down as R. Marsh."

"Meaning yourself?"

"Yes."

"But do you mean—"

"I shall appear there in my proper person. It is safe to be known as R. Marsh, for my sobriquet of Round-up Rube or Rustler Rube is so universally used that not one man in a thousand knows my surname."

"You think you can do better work thus, eh?"

"Marsh, the hunter, can do what Perkins, the detective, cannot; he can talk with men and women without finding them constantly on their guard. By the way, is that the canal over yonder?"

"That's what is completed."

"I want to see it."

The detective seemed to be of an inquiring turn of mind, and as the flowers and shrubs of Landgrove's garden had interested him, so the canal now drew his thoughts away from the Smith case. This time, however, Ball was in thorough sympathy, and he was soon exhibiting the visible part of the Sacred Comet.

There was but little to be seen. Under the hands of the workmen, led by Thomas Flanders, the superintendent a long excavation had been made in the earth. It began a short distance below the lake, and was fast approaching the ridge.

Marshall gazed at the latter obstacle curiously. It was a formidable thing to subdue. Far greater, and longer, stretches of hill and mountain had been tunneled, but only when in the heart of a wide and fertile country. The Sacred Comet would bring only a small section of country into the rest of the world.

Was it worth the time, labor and money?

Rube was mentally considering this point when Ball suddenly dropped his praises of the scheme and exclaimed:

"Why, there's a woman down there, and I do believe it is Mrs. Sally Hooks!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERY OF SALLY HOOKS.

RUSTLER RUBE's gaze came down from the ridge quickly. He had not forgotten Mrs. Hooks, and he quietly asked:

"Where is she?"

"Well down through the trees yonder. Look past the dead tree—"

"I see!"

All along the line of the canal was a sparse growth of timber. It was free from underbrush, and, as a rule, the trees were far enough apart to admit of a considerable view in any direction. It was all chance, however, that Ball had happened to see the woman, for distance was against him.

Looking according to directions Rube saw the person indicated. But she was not alone; a man stood beside her.

"Sally Hooks, sure enough," the sheriff commented, "but who's with her? I don't know his figure-head."

"She's rather old to be out to meet a lover."

"Yes; and the man don't look half her years."

"They're in earnest. Watch!"

The unknown man had made a quick, sharp gesture, which was like one of anger and menace, but did not seem to be directed against the woman; and she answered it by clasping her hands in a beseeching manner, while she seemed to speak rapidly.

"Queer, by gracious!" Ball commented.

"She motions toward Landgrove's house."

"What is there to connect, I wonder?"

"Suppose we walk that way. We can, at least, learn who her companion is."

The sheriff caught at the idea, and they moved rapidly through the timber. Ball, for one, began to build theories in which Mrs. Sally Hooks had a prominent part, but the hope that they would be able to overhear the conversation was not realized.

Several times on the way they lost sight of the couple, and, as they neared the place of interview, the man was suddenly seen coming toward them.

He was swinging along at a good pace, his gaze directed downward, and had not yet seen them.

"Dick Beech!" Ball exclaimed.

"Who is he?"

"A laborer on the canal. Shall I speak to him?"

"Not by any means. Enter here!"

The detective pushed his companion into a group of trees, the trunks of which afforded concealment, and they watched the man without having their proximity suspected.

Dick Beech was not over twenty-six years of age. He was almost as swarthy and black-haired as an Italian. His features were coarse, and his thick lips noticeably red. On the whole, he looked sullen, passionate and dangerous. His figure was good, however, with promise of plenty of muscle, and as he was not devoid of neatness of person and attire, many a girl of low life might have found Dick Beech an interesting acquaintance.

Something evidently was upon his mind, for, looking down constantly, he muttered as he passed, though not in tones audible to the watchers.

He was hastening toward the canal.

"A low-lived wretch!" Ball muttered.

"Can you prove it?"

"Hardly. He's behaved well enough since he came to Red Lake. He claims to be an expert canalman, so he is commonly called 'the boatman'; but he's working as an ordinary laborer until the Sacred Comet gets a-going. I've often noticed him, with his swarthy, sullen face. An evil fellow, I do believe, though Flanders, the superintendent, is satisfied with him."

"Can you surmise why he should meet Mrs. Sally Hooks?"

"No."

"She's nearly twice his age, you say?"

"Yes."

"Well, they found something of interest to talk about."

"Correct! Hang it all, Marshall, you're the detective in this case, but it seems odd to me that Mrs. Hooks should run away so strangely, and then have this excited talk with Dick Beech. It looks queer!"

"Surely, you don't suspect her?"

"She is a woman nobody would settle upon in ordinary times for a criminal, but when an assassin must be found somewhere, everybody is open to suspicion, I should say."

"You are a wise man, Mr. Ball. Did you say you thought Mrs. Hooks aspired to be the second Mrs. Landgrove?"

"I did say that I had a sneaking idea that such was her hope, but that's only an off-hand guess."

"You don't know that Dick Beech ever had association with Landgrove or Smith, do you?"

"No, but I didn't know, either, that he and Sally Hooks were acquaintances."

"We will look into Master Dick's affairs—or rather, I will. Be a man of silence, sheriff, on all these points."

"I will. If Dick was knowing to the crime, I might be stupid enough to question just the worst parties concerning him," was Ball's sensible conclusion.

"Let us look more closely to the canal, now."

This was done, and Rube was not long in seeing that the heart of Red Lake was in the work.

When Landgrove started the enterprise his first converts were Pomeroy Ash and Sidney Tillotson. Their combined wealth was not equal to his, alone, but they had some money and a good deal of zeal. They became directors, and took up their residence at Red Lake.

For superintendent of the actual work Ash had recommended one Thomas Flanders, and he was still in charge.

Rube found him to be a middle-aged man of stolid manner, but he had already proved very capable. Thus far the work had been rushed, but done in a thorough way. Up the valley was a lake, the water supply of which was amply able to run the canal, if it was ever completed.

The channel through the earth was a model of good workmanship, and Flanders expressed great confidence in their ability to tunnel the ridge successfully. That this could be done, if money enough was obtained, Rube could not doubt, but, though he cast no metaphorical cold water upon the scheme, he had to admit, to himself, that the game did not seem worth the labor and cost.

It was not for him to judge the Sacred Comet, but he did not wonder that Smith had pronounced against its feasibility.

Whether the deceased had been right in affirming that it was a deliberate swindle was another matter.

After leaving the canal, Rube and Ball started for the hotel. The detective would not have done anything to show haste to question Sally Hooks, but they met Landgrove, who announced her return, and said that she could be seen at once.

"She went to call upon a neighbor," he added, carelessly.

"No one ill, I hope?" mildly inquired the detective.

"No. She went on an errand, thinking she

should get back as soon as necessary, but was delayed."

This statement impressed Ball as being a deliberate falsehood on Mrs. Hook's part. He was sure she had not had time enough to go to a neighbor's, and then, later, down to the canal to see Dick Beech.

The sheriff looked inquiringly at Rube, but the latter's face was unreadable, and he asked no more questions.

Ball returned to his office, and the detective accompanied Landgrove to the house. Mrs. Hooks made her appearance promptly when Kate Graham was sent to her.

"You will excuse me, gentlemen, for putting you to inconvenience, I hope, for I did not intend to be so stupid."

The housekeeper made the apology readily, but not volubly, as she glided in, and her voice and manner were as gentle as her way of moving.

"Don't mention it, madam; it is of no importance," returned the Round-up Detective, courteously, as he rose and gave the lady a chair.

She was nervous; he saw that at the start. She was having a battle, too, with her eyes. She tried to keep them upon the detective, but they persistently turned away and avoided his gaze.

His attention to one in her humble position was not without effect, and some of her agitation disappeared; but, when he again faced her, he saw the shadow of dread cast upon her in various ways.

"The killing of Amos Smith was a melancholy affair," he remarked, benignly.

"It was, indeed, Mr. Perkins," she agreed, nervously.

"Nothing alarmed you, during the night?"

"No, sir."

"And you did not hear him stirring?"

"No, sir."

"Were you in the garden at all?"

"No, sir."

"This knife—is it familiar to you?"

Marshall held the weapon forward. Mrs. Hooks looked at it; Rube looked at her. Her face was strangely pale, and her eyes grew large and changed color.

"I never saw it until Stevens found it in Mr. Smith's room," she replied, faintly.

"You are housekeeper. If such a knife had been about the house you would have known it, eh?"

"Yes, sir; I think so."

"How could it have been placed in Smith's room?"

"I can't imagine."

"You had access to the room, did you not?"

"Not after it was first locked up."

"Are you sure that Stevens did not give his key to any one?"

"He says he didn't, and I know that I did not have the key, or see it. I had no desire to go into that room again!"

Mrs. Hooks had been growing nervous, and she now shivered visibly.

"Our women are upset by the late lamentable affair," put in Malachi Landgrove.

"Naturally, naturally," returned Rube, with the patriarchal kindness he could assume so well when figuring as Isaac Perkins.

"I wish Smith had never come here!" declared Mrs. Hooks, with sudden vehemence.

"Why?"

"He has broken up our peaceful life!"

"He has paid the debt, though he may have left his influence behind him."

"Mrs. Hooks is a home-body, who delights in peace," explained Landgrove, looking kindly at the housekeeper. "She would hardly make a pioneer."

True, she did not look like a pioneer. She was too fragile, too much a woman of civilization.

"All these troubles will pass, and time will dim their memory," blandly commented the detective. "Only the guilty persons will have cause for lasting regret."

Mrs. Hooks's color wavered. Her gaze was raised from the floor for an instant, only to sink again.

"Yes, sir," she murmured, vaguely.

"You can go now, Mrs. Hooks."

She went with alacrity, and Rube Marshall turned carelessly to Landgrove.

"I have been looking at the future canal," he remarked, "and I congratulate you on the way the enterprise is being pushed forward."

CHAPTER VII.

THE DETECTIVE OVERHEARS SUGGESTIVE WORDS.

AFTER supper Mr. Isaac Perkins expressed a desire to retire to his room, alleging weariness.

He had explained his intended course of conduct sufficiently to cause Mr. Landgrove some surprise.

A key had been given him, and he stated that no one need be surprised at his movements. He always "covered a good deal of ground," he averred, when on a case, and came and went freely. Thus, it was to be taken as a matter of course if they failed to find him any morning in his room. Possibly, he might go without ex-

planation and be absent for a whole day, or even two days. In such a case, he would be at work, but possibly, too, not in Bighorn Valley.

All this surprised the President of the Sacred Comet, but he had decided already that, mild of manner as Mr. Perkins was, he knew his business, and the man-hunter met with no opposition when his conduct was outlined.

Once in his room, the detective smoked a cigar and meditated.

He had food for thought. He considered the manner of all the persons whom he had met. Some of them had acted peculiarly, when before him, but this might be explained in a simple way.

Considering what had happened, it was not strange that Mazette Duane and Mrs. Hooks had been nervous. Whether the mere shadow of the tragedy was sufficient cause for their perturbation remained to be seen.

One thing puzzled him—the knife found in Smith's room.

Was it that with which the deed had been done?

There was a possibility that the guilty person, or persons, had put it in the room in order to divert suspicion, and that evidence might soon appear which would be as delusive as the knife itself, and intended to put him on a false scent.

If the knife was the genuine one, who had put it in the room, and what had been the object? Ever since the day after the tragedy the door had been locked, and only Landgrove and Levi Stevens had possessed keys to it. But the knife might have been hidden there before the deed was discovered.

In any case, the motive for placing it there was obscure and puzzling.

Did it indicate that a member of the household had done the deed?

From the first, Malachi Landgrove had been very frank with Rube; had faced him freely and boldly; and had expressed strong desire to have the guilty person discovered.

He seemed to be an honest, innocent man, yet if Amos Smith had gone away and made his unfavorable report concerning the Sacred Comet to the Eastern capitalists, a staggering blow—perhaps a fatal blow—would have been dealt Landgrove's cherished scheme.

He, of all men, appeared to have been benefited most by Smith's death—yet, he seemed to be an honest man, as far as the crime was concerned.

Having finished his cigar, Round-up Rube went into the garden by way of the low window. He had this means of exit and entrance in his mind when he asked for a room on the lower floor.

The night was pleasant, the heavens being free from all except floating clouds. There was no moon, but the stars were at their brightest, and sufficient light was at hand to see objects distinctly a considerable distance away.

He wandered on, looking attentively at the walks, the flowers, the shrubbery, and the trees. Landgrove had arranged his grounds with good judgment, and the trees looked particularly noble with such surroundings.

Only a few rods had the detective gone when he detected the odor of cigar-smoke. He was moving toward the quarter whence it seemed to have its origin, when quick footsteps sounded behind him.

Obeying an impulse he stepped out of the path into cover, and waited quietly. A female form appeared, its possessor moving with the light step of youth.

He recognized Kate Graham, the maid-servant.

She passed rapidly, without turning her head, and her manner was so indicative of a fixed purpose that Rube followed her, taking care not to betray himself. The pursuit was short. A third person became visible, and Marshall saw Mark Jeffords, calmly smoking.

Kate had paused and accosted him.

"Do you allow any one to share your solitude?" were her first words audible to Rube.

"Why, I don't own the garden," Mark answered.

"That's not a very warm greeting."

"If I fail in duty, pray overlook it."

"That isn't it," Kate returned. "You're alone; so am I. Do I intrude?"

"She's making love to him," Rube thought.

"He don't reciprocate, as the grain of hardness in her voice shows."

"Be seated, Kate, if you don't object to the cigar-smoke," Jeffords made response.

"Not at all. I like it, and I like company."

"Do you feel lonely?"

"Often."

"I wouldn't have guessed it."

"It isn't every one's company I care for, you see."

"Ah!"

"Perhaps you don't?"

"Don't what?"

"Care for my company?"

"My dear Kate, did I ever use you coldly?"

"No, but I look to the future. I'm a girl who has to work for a living; you're a private secretary. The question is, do you feel above common folks?"

"What in the world are you driving at?" Jeffords demanded, with an air of surprise.

"This town isn't like the East, as you are well aware. Society don't show up well. Now, I'm young, but I find myself left out in the cold. My tastes are refined"—Round-up Rube smiled—"and I won't mix with trash; but other young men are not common. Since you came here I haven't intruded on you, goodness knows! but I'm lonesome!"

Very business-like and calm was this avowal, but, if Kate did not stoop to sentiment, she made herself understood just as much.

"So!" thought Rube, "our kitchen-maid goes a-wooing!"

He smiled again, but it was at Jeffords's dilemma. If Kate was absurd in claiming refined tastes, it was equally certain that she was not to be met with derision. She weighed twenty pounds too much for a model in the way of figure, but her buxom, solid person was well shaped; her complexion was remarkably clear; and many a man of taste not over-critical might have taken her as a wonderfully handsome woman.

What she lacked was just that refinement she claimed to have; what she had, over-much, was a masculinity not agreeable in a lady-love to an intelligent man.

Mark Jeffords could not fail to understand after these broad hints.

"I'm sorry to hear you're lonesome," he responded.

"Really?" Kate inquired.

"Certainly."

"I'm going to test you!"

"Indeed!"

"Yes. Do you like Mazette Duane?"

"Like her?" and there was uneasiness manifest in Mark's voice as he spoke the words; but he followed them up with a laugh, and added: "I like all ladies."

"Including me?"

"Of course."

"Ain't I as pretty as Mazette?"

"It's a rash man that will decide such a delicate matter, my dear Kate; so I hope you'll excuse me."

"Mark Jeffords, would you be ashamed to walk the streets of Red Lake with me?"

"No."

"Then come and let us walk them!"

"Why should we?"

"To prove what you assert; to let people see you escort me!"

"Why in perdition"—Jeffords had grown angry—"should we let them see anything of the kind?"

"I want to know how we stand."

"As for me, I stand upon my feet; I can't help any one else to locate his standing—or hers!"

"So Mazette has the inside track!"

"You grow more and more mysterious," asserted Jeffords, recovering caution. "I am all at sea."

"In plain words, I want you to choose between Mazette and me. You act as if you liked me; I am not so sure that you like her. If you want frankness I'll say that I fancy you; I like you a good deal. Now, I'm tired of this dog's life, with nobody to care a rap for me. I'm as good-looking as Mazette, and I've got twice the strength and endurance, and I'd work my fingers bare to the bones for a man I loved. Now, it may not be womanly in me, but I'd like to know your mind!"

Round-up Rube gazed at the couple in wonder. Here was a matrimonial proposal with a vengeance. He could not distinguish Mark's face, but could well believe that the latter felt far from comfortable.

"My good girl," the secretary returned, after an awkward pause, "you don't know what kind of a man I am. I'm a sort of Wandering Jew on the American plan, a genuine roving Yankee, getting a living by precarious means, wedded to my bachelor life, not fit to have a wife—"

"Then you won't take me?"

"Kate, you don't want me. I'm a good-for-nothing, anyhow—"

"Wait!" she interrupted, peremptorily. "Before we decide the matter, let us consider the Smith case."

"The Smith case?" Jeffords echoed. "What has that to do with it?"

"A good deal. It's your fault that I have to speak out, but I happen to know that you were determined that Smith should not live to go back East with his report!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A CLAIM BACKED BY A LETTER.

ROUND-UP RUBE heard the last assertion with sudden interest. What did it portend? He listened eagerly for the secretary's reply.

"Great heavens!" Jeffords ejaculated, "what idea is working in your mind now?"

"You may not be a stockholder in the Sacred Comet," Kate readily answered, "but you were just as determined as any one that Smith's unfavorable report should not go East. Your reasons you ought to know—"

"What was it to me what his report was?" demanded the secretary, sharply.

"We won't quarrel. Let me tell you what I know. A few days before Smith was killed I saw, when in your room cleaning up the windows, that you had been burning papers in the stove. Some of the ashes were drifting out, and, when brushing them back, I noticed one paper only half burned up. I saw writing on it, and I took the liberty of reading it. What I found there I have learned by heart, and it was as follows:

"If Smith gets back to Brooklyn alive, he will ruin the whole thing without presenting any proof. He judges only by what he sees, and what all men can see, but is headstrong enough to think that sufficient. If he puts his scare into Eastern minds, he lays out all competitors, for a scare will lead to investigation. Such being the case, Smith must be stopped, else I am done up. I must knock him out. Just how I shall do it I can't say, but such an unreasonable old fellow is not going to kill the Sacred Comet. I'll put a quietus on him, or—"

"There the writing ended," continued Kate, "one corner being torn off. Now, I wonder what Isaac Perkins would say if he should read it, in your handwriting?"

The detective listened almost breathlessly for the secretary's answer.

"Mad girl!" Jeffords cried, "you have dreamed all this!"

"Have I? Well, I've got the written paper, all the same, sir!"

"But it isn't mine—"

"I'll swear it's in your writing."

"Even if it is, what of it?"

"Just take a few extracts and see how they sound: 'If Smith gets back to Brooklyn alive, I must knock him out.' 'I'll put a quietus on him!' Those remarks go well with the fact that somebody did kill Smith!"

"Kate, you are entirely out of your reckoning—"

"Shall I show the paper to Perkins?"

"Where is it?"

Kate laughed audibly.

"Where you can't find it."

"Hang the paper! I don't want it!"

"Then I'll give it to Perkins!"

"I plead not guilty to the whole thing; if you have such a paper, it's a forgery. Still, I shouldn't want any trouble it might bring me, and I'll give you ten dollars for it."

"Let me set the price!" cried Kate, laughing again. "I may not be so modest as some folks, but I'd do my level best for a man if he was my husband. I defy any one to say I ain't good looking, and if you liked me as well as I do you, we'd soon make a bargain. That's my price!"

"Mad! mad!" Jeffords exclaimed.

"When I'm your wife you can have that paper and burn it."

"I never wrote such a thing."

"Then, of course, you'd just as soon have me give it to Perkins?"

"Hang it all! don't you see it would bring trouble to an innocent man—myself?"

"What should an innocent man care?"

"Innocence and safety don't always go together."

"They can, now, if you wish. I'm innocent; I can give you safety."

"Kate, you must be joking."

"I ain't; I'm in earnest."

"What should you care for me?"

"What should any person care for another? Why should the sun rise and set. It can't help it, can it? But come, Mr. Jeffords, I ain't going to be mean about this. The document is in a safe place, and there it may stay until you've had time to think it over. I'm not in a hurry, and I can't stay out here any longer to-night. I'll give you time to think it over, and I reckon you will see where your interests lie. I'm smart, if I do say it, and I'll do my share of the work in the future. All I ask is that you'll love and marry me. I won't disgrace you. I may not be so refined and educated as some, but I'll learn. That ain't anything a woman can't learn. Now, I'll leave you, and you can depend upon me to keep still until you decide. You have my best wishes, and I don't care if you did fix Amos Smith. He was a prying meddler. Don't be down-hearted, for it'll come out right, I know. Good-night!"

Perpetual motion seemed to have found an abiding-place in Kate's tongue. She poured out her remarkable speech without giving Jeffords a chance to speak, though this he did not attempt to do.

When she had finished she hurried away toward the house. Round-up Rube let her pass without discovering himself. No matter whether she was right or wrong, the time was not ripe far him to make a bold move.

Jeffords would deny everything, and, until Kate was made angry by his refusal, it would be hard to make her surrender the paper she claimed to have.

As for the secretary, he stood and gazed after Kate until she vanished, appearing to be utterly dumfounded. Guilty or not, he had reason to be dumfounded by the charge she had made.

Thus several minutes passed. Several times Jeffords made an irritable gesture, as though he

was going over the ground in imagination and found the outlook most unfavorable.

Rube had seen a good deal of life during his detective career, and his experience told him that no evil genius was so persistent, so much to be dreaded and so merciless as a determined woman who was not kept in check by the instincts and habits of honor.

Kate had shown her nature plainly. She had offered to hide for a price what she regarded as a crime, and was eager to unite her fortunes with those of the criminal.

Truly, the secretary had cause for apprehension.

Again footsteps sounded, and Jeffords, evidently dreading the return of the ardent Miss Graham, beat a hurried retreat through the shrubbery.

Rube Marshal kept his place.

Another man appeared, but one he did not recognize at first. It was a figure rather short but decidedly muscular, and its owner's movements were of a slouching nature. A hat tipped on one side, and hands thrust in trousers pockets, added a free-and-easy, impudent air to all.

The person came into stronger light, and the ex-cowboy saw a swarthy face with a faint black mustache on the upper lip; he recognized Dick Beech, "the boatman."

Curiosity was reawakened. What was Dick Beech doing near that house?

Rube was so interested in the subject, and in the man, that he did not notice the approach of another stroller until the latter and Dick came face to face just opposite the detective's court.

The latest comer was Malachi Landgrove.

"How d'y, boss?"

It was a surly, familiar growl from Dick Beech, but Landgrove was slow with his reply.

"Who are you?" he asked, at last.

"Don't know me, eh?"

"No."

"I spade it fur a livin' over yon."

The boatman pointed toward the canal, and the hint was quite sufficient.

"Oh! it's you, Beech, is it?"

"Beech it is."

"Out for an airing?"

"Probably!"

Dick had not removed his hands from his pockets. He now thrust them lower down, as though trying to run them through the pockets; his shoulders followed on the down-grade until he was humped up so that he looked like an ugly toad about to make a leap. And, unless Round-up Rube erred, he was a toad in whom there was much harm.

His response to Landgrove was even more surly and offensive than vague, which was unnecessary, but the President of the Sacred Comet let it pass.

"You are the man, I believe, who is an expert canal-boatman?" he inquired.

"That's me."

"We shall have to give you a boat when the Sacred Comet gets under operation."

"Is that all you kin do fur me?"

"I know of nothing else, at present, for all our official positions are filled."

Dick laughed harshly.

"Lord! Lord! ain't it funny ter see that part o' the job done, an' a mountain o' rock r'arin' up in the air over thar. Say, boss, it's easier ter make officers on paper, than ter tunnel a ridge wid drill an' powder, ain't it? Eh?"

His manner was insolent and offensive, and Malachi, touched in his most vulnerable spot, stiffly responded:

"If you don't believe in the Sacred Comet, you are at liberty to quit our service as soon as you choose."

"Believe in it? I believe in it same as you do; it's a good snare for other men's money?"

"Sir!"

"Oh! come off! I know you never expect to put the tunnel through. It's all a money-job!"

"Beech," cried the president, "you are discharged from the service of the Sacred Comet Company!"

"Anything more?"

"What more do you expect?"

"I expect you'd like ter shet off my wind as you did Smith's!"

CHAPTER IX.

AN ACCUSATION WEAKLY DENIED.

AGAIN the conversation was growing very interesting to Round-up Rube, and he leaned forward and listened even more attentively.

"You impudent scoundrel!" cried Landgrove, glaring fiercely at Dick Beech, "be careful what you say!"

"Touched a tender spot, did I?" chuckled the boatman.

"Your random words were illy chosen."

"They wa'n't random words. You don't mean ter say you don't know who killed Amos Smith, do you?"

"It may have been you."

"Softly! What motive had I? What motive had you? The hand that did Smith up prevented him from going back East ter say that the canal scheme was a fraud, and only a trap for capitalists and their money."

"You insolent dog!" cried Landgrove, clinching his hands and starting forward in a rage, "I'll—"

"No, you won't! Hold up, boss, fur I could 'do ye up' without turnin' a hair. Let us stick ter the subjeck. Didn't know I was in the garding an' seen Amos sent over the divide, did ye? Wal, I was, an' ef you want the blamed old canal ter be dug even as fur as the ridge, you'll treat me with respect. Ef ye don't, I'll nail you and the Ring-tailed Comet right off, kerslap!"

If it was possible, Dick Beech's insolence increased. But did he know as much as he claimed? That he was a thorough ruffian no one could doubt, but Rube Marshall was in doubt as to how far he should be believed.

"Beech," Landgrove answered, in an unsteady voice, "you don't appear to have been drinking, so I am at a loss how to account for your insolent conduct—"

"As fur as I know, I've been wholly respectful."

"Then Providence give strength to the man to whom you are disrespectful."

"All I've done," persisted Dick, sulkily, "is ter talk right out, plain. I admit that I come ter Red Lake wid hate in me heart, an' with schemes ter hurt ye; but all this has changed. I'm willin' ter roost on the same ladder whar you are straddlin' the top round. Now, I hold that I ain't been sassy, at all: I only wanted ter let ye see I was onter the racket."

"There is no 'racket'."

"I say you did up Smith!"

"It is false, sir!"

"You've got the cheek! Why, wa'n't I in the garding, that night?"

"What did you see?"

"Oh! you know!"

"You villain! I know nothing about it."

"Hold up, boss! Don't git excited—"

"Old as I am, I'll chastise you if you repeat your insults."

"Let's have a new deal. You think I mean ter do ye harm, but I don't—ef you use me right. I'll keep yer secret as close as you kin—ef you'll let me inter the snap. See?"

"I decline to deal with you."

"Can't ye give a feller a chance? Hyar I'm as mild an' gentle as a lamb, but you're howlin' like a mad-dog. Listen ter me! You know me only as Dick Beech. Who d'ye s'pose my mother was?"

"I don't care who she was."

"Bet yer life you do! Her name was Margaret Arnold. Ah! that hits ye!"

"Nonsense!"

"Do ye mean ter say you never knew her?"

"I knew a Margaret Arnold, but I neither know nor care whose son you are."

"Not even who my father was?"

"No."

"That's a lie!" retorted Beech, with his coarse bluntness. "You was the man—you, Malachi!"

"Wretch, you speak an infamous falsehood!"

"Steady, boss, steady! I say you married Margaret Arnold, an' that I'm yer son. I can't prove the marriage—I say that frankly. Ef I could, there would 'a' been trouble fur you long ago. I come ter Red Lake with a lava-bed in my heart. I hated you bitterly, fur I knew the same cause that kep' you from acknowledging my mother as your wife would keep you from acknowledging me as your son. She had been poor, uneducated, an' ignorant, an' I'd growed up the same way. A rich aristocrat don't cotton to a son who can't tell a noun from a transition verb."

Dick hesitated over the last statement with the well-founded fear that he had delved too deeply in grammatical terms for his own good, and then went on rapidly:

"Now, I ain't your enemy, an' I don't mean to cut up rough, but I ain't too much human ter want a shake in the Sacred Comet razzle-dazzle. Set me a-talkin' an' I can do a pile o' hurt; gag me with gold, an' never a harm will I do ye."

"Young man," Landgrove sternly retorted, "do you know whither you are drifting?"

"Eh?"

"I can have you arrested for slander."

"But you won't," was the swift reply. "It would do the canal scheme a heap o' hurt ter have me go ag'in' you."

"Do you suppose your word would outweigh mine?"

"Jes' now, it would. The canal is on the teeter-board; every ounce tells, you bet!"

"Your impudence amazes me."

"I'm not impudent. I don't ask you to do anything but give me a lift. I'm tired of bein' a hard-worked dog. Knowin' as I do how Smith was killed, I deserve a plum or two. Help me with the canal game, an' I'll never put in any claim that I'm your son!"

There was a movement among the bushes so close to Round-up Rube that he thought he was discovered, but the new feature in the event swept past and revealed the noble form and beautiful face of Rachel Landgrove.

"Father!" she cried, with spirit, "why do you parley with this ruffian?"

"Ruffian!" muttered Dick Beech, in an ugly way.

"What else are you?"

"Your half-brother!"

"It is false—false as your own heart!"

"Go away! I ain't here ter querril with a woman."

"I have heard a part of your language toward my father."

"Sol Wal, it may be jest as well for you ter know the facts, fur, with a sweet daughter, Malachi has a reason for silence besides the canal."

"Facts!" Rachel echoed, scornfully. "Every word you have said has been false."

"My dear," Landgrove interposed, "let me deal with this man."

"Your place is in the house," added Dick, surlily.

"My place is here, by my father's side; yours is in prison!"

"Look you!" cried the boatman, "you've gone fur enough. I've said it, an' I mean it, that I ain't here to make a row; but a sassy woman's tongue kin raise a riot out of a toy-torpedo. Don't you get the evil in me up, my lady, or I'll live ter humble you—I swear it!"

He flung one hand upward as though to add weight to his oath, and the vindictiveness of his nature was as impressive as the dignity of a nobler man, but in a darker, more dangerous way. It silenced Rachel. Her vehemence was unusual to her, and only love for her father had led her to assert herself as she did; and when Dick Beech thus showed the rougher side of his nature, she shrunk appalled from the storm she had raised.

Even in the dim light she could see enough in his face and eyes to silence her.

"Let this talk end here," Landgrove commanded, with a glance of regret toward his daughter. "None of us should crave trouble; trouble we need not have. You, Mr. Beech, stand likely to share in the profits of the Sacred Canal, as all do—"

"That won't answer. I want ter be a stockholder."

"Where is your money?"

"Your secret is my money."

"I tell you that you are mistaken—"

"And I say that you killed Smith!"

"Infamous! infamous!" Rachel murmured.

"You are absurd," calmly returned the capitalist. "Smith met with no harm at my hands, or at my instigation."

"We won't argue it. You know you don't want me to tell what I know about that, or about Margaret Arnold. Tell ye what, boss, I'll give ye a few days ter think it over. I won't press the matter; let us hev peace. Ef I've spoke rude ter you or the lady, jest overlook it in a plain man. Let's hev a friendly feelin' all around."

Rachel expected to hear her father reject the proposal with scorn, but his course was not in that line.

"You show sense now, Beech," he remarked. "There is no need of trouble. Let this matter rest for now, and we will talk at a more favorable time and place. This garden is too public, you know."

"Fact, boss; fact!" Dick admitted, in sly triumph. "I'll go, an' see ye later. So-long both on ye."

He made an effort to lift his hat, but it was of soft material, and he was not accustomed to the act of gallantry, and he made a failure of it. Then he slouched down the walk in the way so offensive to critical eyes.

Not until he was out of sight was the silence broken. Then Rachel spoke.

"Father, haven't you made a mistake?"

"How?"

"By making a truce with that person."

"It was prudence; I dared not do otherwise."

"Dared not?"

"At present, the Sacred Comet cannot bear the weight of even unjust accusations—nor can I, as its president. Later, I'll give this low-browed wretch a lesson—when the danger is over. Providence hasten the time!"

He spoke gloomily, and, while speaking, had mechanically taken Rachel's arm and started toward the house. They receded, leaving Rube Marshall in the state of perplexity natural to one who had heard so many strange statements.

CHAPTER X.

RACHEL FAILS TO COUNT THE COST.

THE workmen on the canal were not the best of citizens. When laborers were wanted, gold diggers and the like did not show an alacrity to seize the pick and spade and turn up the soil all through the day for—not nuggets, but small pay in cash.

The result was the gang was gathered from points further East, and was about what such gangs usually are. Nearly every nation was represented, but not well represented. There were honest men in the party, but they were in the minority. Taken as a whole, the collection was not an honor to Red Lake, and the genuine citizens knew it.

The men were all lodged together. A long shanty had been put up, and there the laborers slept. That they did not make long nights had been discovered by all who had been near their quarters in the evening. There they gambled, smoked and drank, and that they were not drunk

all the time was due to the fact that, by Landgrove's orders, Superintendent Flanders limited the quantity allowed them.

On the day following the scenes of the last chapter, Jimmy Robinson—more commonly called Jimmy Rob—the cook, was completing his forenoon's work when he had an unexpected visitor.

Jimmy Rob was not a hard citizen. He was an honest man of simple, practical mind, and one of those rare persons content to get rich slowly. In a generation where men aspired to reach the dizzy elevation of the millionaire without labor, Jimmy shone as brightly as his own pots, kettles and pans, as an example of hard common sense.

Yet, Jimmy had his weaknesses, and he dropped a kettle and then nearly fell over it, when a young and beautiful woman entered the door.

He knew her well; he adored her in a respectful way. As the daughter of a great man, who was likewise his employer, and as the most charming woman he had ever seen, he regarded her as the brightest jewel that gave luster to the Sacred Comet epoch—for this was Rachel Landgrove.

Jimmy promptly chased and captured the elusive kettle, and then straightened up and bowed low while holding it in his arms.

"Beg yer pardon, mum!" he then stammered.

"Don't, Jimmy!" she returned, brightly. "I doubt if you ever had good cause to apologize in your life."

"You don't know how harrer in' a kittle is ter a feller's feelin's, mum."

"Anyway, you have conquered it."

"Yes, but it broozed my thumb-toe woundedly. Hows'ever, that ain't hyar nor thar. Kin I be of sarvice to ye, mum?"

"You can, Mr. Robinson."

"I'm yer sarvint, mum?"

"You still cook for the men, of course?"

"I am cook fur the laborers; some on 'em is men, some ain't. Some is barbarians. The Odds-an'-Ends Pirates I call them."

"Rough, are they?"

"You should be hyar one evenin'—no, you shouldn't, fur it's hideous. You kin see their ear-marks now. Look!"

Rachel obeyed.

The beds of the men were collections of pine boughs, upon which they spread their blankets. Their table was a long line of single boards. And upon the beds, and upon the tables, were empty bottles, and packs of cards galore. Having heard of the workmen, Rachel could dimly imagine the scene enacted there.

"But you say some are worthy men?"

"A few—a very few."

"Who?"

"Wal, there's Peter Jones, Ned Cross, Alf Rand, Mike Quinlan, Tim Ferguson, Louis Le-grand, Edwardo Castro—an', perhaps, you might put in a Russian, whose name I don't remember."

"No more?"

"Not one!"

"There's a man named Dick Beech here, I believe."

"Yes."

"What about him?"

"He's a bad 'un, is Dick. Even the Italians an' Bohemians don't keer ter have a row with him—though, of course, a row may come any time. So fur, thank goodness, fist-fights hev been the worst we've had hyar; but the gang all goes armed, an' I look fur dark work any time. I hope, mum, that trouble will never happen at the canal, fur ef that gang was let loose hyar in anger, it'd be a black day fur our town!"

Jimmy shook his head gravely, and Rachel could not help shivering. She knew enough about the affairs of the Sacred Comet to be aware that dissatisfied stockholders, or the law, might set a heavy foot upon it at any time.

If this occurred, what would prevent the laborers, the outcasts of every nation, from rioting?

Such a large force could, perhaps, bring ruin to the whole town.

"But," she continued, returning to the line of investigation, "these men don't go out much, do they?"

"Not as a rule. They ain't welcome no-whar, an' Mr. Landgrove wisely decided that ev'ry inducement should be given them ter stay in, by puttin' here all the things they needed. No; they stay hyar, an' drink, gamble an' quarril, but some on 'em goes out now an' then."

"How about the Dick Beech of whom we spoke?"

"He goes out pretty frequent."

"Can you remember just when?"

"Bless me! no."

"Mr. Robinson, I am going to put confidence in you, and ask you a question which I don't want you to repeat to any one. I feel sure that I can trust you."

"That you can, Miss Rachel, ev'ry time!"

"Then, do you know where Dick Beech was the night that Amos Smith was killed?"

Jimmy started nervously.

"Eh? What's that?" he asked.

The question was repeated.

"Miss Rachel, did he do it?" the cook demanded, in a hushed voice.

"Not to my knowledge, but I hope you will be able to tell me whether Beech went out that evening."

Jimmy shook his head.

"That was six days ago—a long while ter remember the doin's of sech a wild-headed crowd as these canal-men be."

"Try Jimmy! try!"

"I will."

Mr. Rob ran his ten fingers up through his hair, and as it was long, stiff hair, he threw it into endless confusion which made him look like a cross between an anarchist and a porcupine.

"That night!—that night!" he muttered.

"What did the Odds-an'-Ends Pirates do? Of course they did the same as usual, an' dranked, gambled an' quarried. But about Dick Beech! He goes out now an' then; what did he do that night?"

Rachel did not interrupt, and the cook kept at work on his hair. Wilder became the hirsute growth until it was like a jungle, but no idea worked out of the underbrush.

"What did he do? Whar was he? Did he go out?"

Rachel listened to Jimmy's mutterings, but her watchful eyes detected no change in his face which would indicate success on his part.

"I can't get it!" he finally announced. "One evenin' here is same as another. I see this man an' that man o' the Odds-an'-Ends Pirates go an' come, but I can't tell when they did it."

"And you remember nothing about that night?"

"I don't."

"I am greatly disappointed."

"So be I."

"You may think, later."

"Mebbe," Jimmy admitted, doubtfully.

"It would be a great favor to me."

"I'd crawl over the divide on my knees fur you. But why not ask Dick?"

"Not for the world," Rachel answered, hastily.

"Of all persons, Beech must be kept in ignorance. You must be as silent as the grave. Be wise, Jimmy!"

"I'll try, though the foundation ter build on is poor, mighty poor! But, say! I kin suggest jest the man you want ter help ye. This mornin' in come an old friend o' mine."

"Hello, Jimmy Rob!" says he.

"Great sarpen'ts! is it you?" says I.

"It's me," says he.

"Where'd you drop frum?" says I.

"I've jest come ter town," says he; "an' I've put up at the hotel fur a season."

"That's what he said, an' now, see hyar: That man is a wonderful critter. He's been a cowboy, a hunter, a trailer, an' he's ez sharp ez the delicate eend of a needle—an' ez dangerous. Them who set down on him rise right up an' howl. I never seen his like; shouldn't wonder ef he had some o' Daniel Boone's blood in his veins, though he's got an awful lot o' his own blood; 'tain't borrowed blood, you kin bet!"

"And who is this prodigy?"

Jimmy started to speak, hesitated, colored deeply and ran his fingers in the jungle of hair on his head.

"R—R—R—R. Marsh!" he stammered.

"He has a good many initials."

"Only one, an' that's R—r—r—r!"

Description can but poorly express simple-minded Jimmy's way at that time. He was confused, and at sea, figuratively speaking. The fact was, he had a secret, and was not well adapted to the task of keeping it. In his effort to avoid sounding the full name of which "R" was the initial, he held on to the single letter and rolled it like reverberating thunder on a small scale.

It was at this crisis that steps sounded at the door. A tall, handsome young man entered, and the cook's face grew bright.

"Hyar he is now; the very critter. Miss Rachel, this is R—R—R. Marsh!"

The new-comer smiled in amusement.

"Pardon me, miss," he said, in a deep, musical voice, "but, after such an elaborate introduction, we should feel well acquainted. As Jimmy Rob has said, my name is R. Marsh."

He did not stammer over the initial, but Rachel experienced a momentary feeling of surprise that he should give his name in such an abbreviated form.

"You are an old friend of Mr. Robinson, he says."

"Yes, yes!" cried Jimmy; "when I was cook on the Bitter Spice Ranch—"

R. Marsh gave him a warning glance.

"Jimmy was always a cook, and I've eaten the famous dishes of his manufacture more than once."

"Yes, an' he's the man you want ter help ye!" declared Jimmy. "What he can't find out ain't worth knowin'. State yer case ter him!"

"You forget that Mr. Marsh may be busy," interrupted Rachel, in embarrassment.

"If I can aid you I shall be pleased," frankly admitted R. Marsh.

"State yer case!" reiterated the cook. "She wants ter know about a certain Dick—"

"Jimmy!"

Never before had Rachel spoken so severely to

the worthy cook, and he stopped short and stared at her with open mouth, too much dismayed to close it.

"I told you to be silent," she added.

"Jimmy, betray no confidence put in you," directed Mr. Marsh, quietly. "Miss Landgrove, pray do not feel offended. I know that Rob can be as close-mouthed as any one, but long acquaintance with me, and full confidence in me, made him reckless for a moment. I'll swear he would be a statue of silence with a stranger. Of course he must not betray your confidence even to me; though, in point of fact, I should be glad to help you if I can."

Rachel gazed thoughtfully at the speaker. He did not resemble the "Odds-and-Ends Pirates."

He had a face which differed from the faces of most men. The first thing to impress the beholder was that indefinable stamp which tells of a strong, well-balanced mind, but there was no trace of conceit or bravado in it. Strangely enough, Rachel found a thought expressed in words in her mind: "He would be just the man for a forlorn hope, but he would engage in it modestly."

She thought, too, that it was an honest, honorable face, and another idea occurred to her.

He was a stranger at Red Lake. Jimmy Rob vouched for his reliability. Would she not do wisely to secure an ally? She felt that the present crisis demanded a shrewd, active man to defend the Landgrove honor and the Landgrove future.

If she had a brother—But she had no brother. Instead, R. Marsh stood before her, bold, manly, respectful, with his offer of assistance.

Perhaps Providence had sent the chance.

"Mr. Marsh," she said, suddenly, "I am tempted to take you at your offer, and request your aid!"

CHAPTER XI.

A COMPACT WHICH THREATENS TROUBLE.

The mountaineer bowed gravely.

"As I said before, I am at your service," he returned.

At that moment Round-up Rube experienced some compunctions of conscience. Clearly, Rachel had no suspicion that he and aged Isaac Perkins were one, and he was about to enter upon a career of more or less duplicity.

As Rachel's helper, he was liable to have secrets confided to him, and to make discoveries, which would not be open to him otherwise. He was an honorable man, and the fact impressed him strongly that he was liable to do an injustice to Miss Landgrove.

Detectives cannot always be too rigid in their devotion to the finer sense of honor and make a success of their work, and Rube Marshall, before then, had let persons talk to him blindly, but his conscience was very active all of a sudden.

He looked at Rachel, and felt that he would be a scoundrel to gain her confidence thus in a case which looked so threatening against her father.

What if the girl should be the innocent cause of bringing ruin to the President of the Sacred Comet?

However, professional duty was not to be neglected, and Rube steeled his heart.

"I will trust you," Rachel decided. "Jimmy Robinson is my friend, and I feel sure that he would not recommend any one in whom my trust would be misplaced. Shall I explain my dilemma, Mr. Marsh?"

"If you please."

"I think you are a stranger at Red Lake?"

"I am."

"Perhaps, though, you have heard of the canal?"

"Oh! yes."

"One of the workmen there is named Dick Beech. I fear and suspect that man!"

"May I ask why?"

"Has Mr. Robinson told you of the murder recently committed here?"

"Yes."

"I think Beech did the deed."

"Ah! What evidence have you?"

"Very little, except an intuition that it is so. Beech, in any case, is an evil, lawless man. Just at present he is trying to intimidate another man, and cast doubts upon him. From this I argue that he is guilty."

Rachel looked at Rube imploringly, anxious to convince him. There had been times when the ex-cowboy, seeking to "round-up" some criminal, had smiled derisively at such shadowy "evidence" as this, but, with Rachel looking at him, it was a very different matter.

He saw how purely theoretical her claim was, but he wished that it was supported by known facts, and met her regard sympathetically.

"Had he a grudge against Smith?" Rube asked.

"Not to my knowledge, but he may have done it to rob the old gentleman. True, Smith had left his watch and money in the house, but an assassin could not know that."

"Certainly not."

"I have been questioning Jimmy in regard to Beech's whereabouts the night of the crime,

but he cannot recall whether the boatman went out."

"I wish I could, by gracious!" declared Jimmy Rob.

"This Beech is an evil fellow, you say?" pursued Marshall.

"Yes."

"What proof have you?"

"His own words."

"Pray, who is the man he has sought to cast suspicion upon?"

Rachel hesitated, but the frank, manly face before her invited confidence.

"My father!" she admitted.

Jimmy Rob threw up both hands.

"Shades o' Herod and Nero!" he groaned, aghast.

"Surely," answered the detective, "he can support the claim with no proof?"

"He advanced none."

"Then, why the claim?"

Rachel again hesitated.

"I may as well be frank with you, Mr. Marsh," she finally answered. "The odious man is absurd in his claims, but there are times when even absurdity is dangerous. The good name of my father is inexpressibly dear to me, and I want to save him from all trouble. He does not suspect that I am making this present move"—Rube could well believe the statement—"and I want to keep it secret. Above all, I want to save him."

"Your devotion is noble!"

"Know, then, that Beech has made claim that he is the child of my father and a certain Margaret Arnold, by a marriage dating back of that of my own mother and father."

"Singular!"

"It is infamous! He admitted that he could prove nothing, and made the charge in a casual way which was proof of its falsity. My father denies it point-blank. He did know Margaret Arnold, once, but only as a mere acquaintance."

"I perceive."

"Beech said frankly that money was his object, and he uses this alleged secret as a lever to work the claim. Then he claims that father was engaged in Smith's death, but gives no proof of that charge. You will see that it is all an act of intimidation."

"Why doesn't your father have him arrested?"

"Because of the Sacred Comet Canal. Until its success is certain there must be nothing to annoy father."

The detective understood the delicate allusion far better than Rachel supposed he did.

"What mode of operation would you suggest?" he inquired.

"Can you learn where Beech was that night?"

"That may be difficult."

"I realize it fully," she sighed.

"However, I'll look after Master Dick—provided that you are as silent as you ask me to be. I'm a modest man, Miss Landgrove, and want to be let alone here. Grizzly bears I can confront calmly, for I know their ways, but a humble hunter don't want notoriety. If I engage to help you, I must ask that you confide in no one, not even your father."

"It shall be as you say."

"I'll let you know what I learn, and you can reciprocate."

"Gladly!"

"From time to time I'll see you, and you must give me every point you get. What seems insignificant to you may be just the reverse to me."

"You shall know all."

"Then it's a bargain?"

"Yes."

He held out his hand, and she gave her own frankly. As they stood thus, looking each other in the eyes, Rube Marshall felt like a villain of the deepest dye. By the terms of this compact he was to have her confidence, and things that she might tell, thinking they would aid her father, might be the means of ruining him. Many men, when as devoted to detective work as the ex-cowboy was, would not have hesitated in the face of this fact, but he despised trickery in any form, and it had never appeared so contemptible, as applied generally and individually, as when he met the earnest gaze of Rachel's clear blue eyes.

They were still standing with clasped hands, when the door was darkened by the entrance of another man.

They were well back from that point, and did not notice the intrusion, but the new-comer paused and looked in an intent manner.

Then he advanced.

Jimmy Rob was the first to see him, and the cook's neck was bent in a humble bow.

"Welcome, Mr. Tiliotson—welcome, sir!" he said, politely.

At the first mention of the name Rachel shifted her gaze hurriedly, her face flushed, and she withdrew her hand hastily from Rube's.

"Happy to see you, Miss Rachel," asserted the new-comer, removing his hat. "The poor camp of Spartacus is much honored by your presence—to quote with a variation."

Rachel was silent; Rachel was embarrassed. When she allowed Mr. Marshall to hold her

hand so long she had thought of nothing but her father, but she could see very easily that an outsider might interpret it differently. And this particular outsider was one she did not like strongly.

It was Sidney Tillotson, stockholder and a director of the Sacred Comet.

He was a man still less than thirty years old, and the possessor of a good form and face. If he had an enemy in Bighorn Valley the public did not know of the fact. He was liked by all—all except Rachel. She knew no evil of him, but she had detected the fact that he regarded her with feelings warmer than those of mere friendship. In a word, she felt sure he would one day ask her to marry him, and, with the perversity which afflicts the human kind, at times, she disliked him for contemplating the step.

On the other hand, Malachi Landgrove thought very well of Tillotson, appreciated his aid in the business affairs of the canal enterprise, and would have been glad to see Rachel and his fellow-director unite their fortunes for life.

Neither he nor Sidney had worried the girl about the matter, however, and Tillotson could not be regarded as a suitor, as yet, but Rachel was embarrassed and annoyed that he should find her hand-in-hand with Marsh.

He would be likely to draw an incorrect conclusion, she would not put him right, and, as a result, she must rest in a false position, in his eyes.

CHAPTER XII.

THE THRUST OF A KNIFE.

RACHEL rallied and responded:

"Judging by appearances, something is needed to honor this camp."

Tillotson shook his head.

"Correct, Miss Landgrove. What with the cards and whisky-bottle, this is a place which would shock the ordinary reformer; but it just suits the taste of the wild spirits who congregate here."

"The Odds-an'-Ends Pirates!" muttered Jimmy Rob, disdainfully.

"You name them well, but there's a change ahead. We had to take such men as we could get, for laborers, but we are bound to tone them down. Henceforth, they will be limited to two drinks a day, for some of our citizens fear a drunken outbreak, if they are allowed to go on as they are."

"It can't be done!" declared Jimmy.

"What can't be done?"

"Them Pirates will hev whisky!"

"They shall not have it to excess!"

"They'll get it."

"Let me catch them bringing it in!"

"You'll excuse me," interrupted Rube, "but I think you will do unwisely to try and put those rough-and-tumble fellows in the reform school. There is danger in them, if they're angered, and the trouble you fear might be precipitated."

"We will try to do no damage," Tillotson returned, pleasantly.

Rachel remembered that she had not introduced the young men to each other, and hastened to repair the omission. Tillotson gave Rube's hand a clasp as hearty as though he had not lately seen that hand holding Rachel's.

"Glad to see you at Red Lake," he asserted. "You are a man of muscle, and that's what we want in Bighorn Valley. We are not content to stand still, like the fossilized towns west of the Mississippi."

Marshall made a few remarks, as in duty bound, in regard to the mountain-locked valley, and said a good word for the Sacred Comet, thereby arousing the usual Red Lake enthusiasm, for Tillotson at once took place as a zealous eulogist of the scheme; but the little party did not waste much time.

Miss Landgrove was ill at ease, and she bade the men good-day and left the shanty.

Rube stayed only long enough to make it apparent that he was not following her, and then went to the hotel. There he had registered, previously, as "R. Marsh, Top Peak, Wyoming," and his dual life at Red Lake was fully begun.

As long as he could keep his secret—Jimmy Rob and Sheriff Ball were his only confidants—he could move freely about as either Marsh or Isaac Perkins, and, in either role, discover many things not to be learned in the other.

He had chosen a room at the hotel as wisely as at Landgrove's, and, when he wished to come or go secretly, or to change his personal appearance, had only to do the latter and slip out quietly.

Unless chance went against him, he had but little fear of discovery.

His disguise he intended to keep under lock and key, when it was not in use.

Much of the day he passed at the hotel, and his character of an idle wanderer from the mountains was well sustained; but his hopes of overhearing something of importance were not met with success.

Shortly after nightfall he went to his room, made himself up as Isaac Perkins, and returned to Landgrove's. He admitted himself with the key Malachi had given him, and the first person he encountered was Rachel.

They met in the hall, and he distinctly saw her shiver.

He tried to make a few remarks in old Perkins's bland way, but she hurried off without much ceremony.

The incident dampened his spirits, somehow. Even if she did not suspect the fact, he was the same man she had so blindly made her ally at Jimmy Rob's quarters, and it brought his own plans home to him with new force.

She shrunk from Perkins, the detective, with dread—perhaps, with loathing. What would she say when she learned that, in another guise, he had deliberately invited and gained her confidence.

It was strange how much his thoughts dwelt upon her, anyway; but she was one fit for meditation and homage.

At the supper-table, a little later, Perkins was calm and sociable; Landgrove, thoughtful of his guests' comfort; Jeffords, polite and at ease; but Rachel and Mazette seldom spoke. Neither glanced often at Perkins, and he saw both shiver when they did so.

Truly, he did not stand high in their estimation, and he felt more like a criminal than a detective.

Early in the evening he retired to his room, and, after a short time, extinguished his light. His success the previous evening in finding people astir had been remarkable, and, though he did not expect it to be duplicated, he intended to investigate, and wished it to be thought that he had retired.

There was a transom over the door—the only objectionable feature of the room—and, to guard against prying eyes, he proceeded to fix a dummy in his bed which should have the form and general appearance of a sleeping man.

This done, he sat down in the most retired corner to await the proper hour for moving.

He heard nine o'clock proclaimed by the clock in the next room, and mentally gave himself one more hour of inactivity.

But he did not sit the hour out.

He heard the usual sounds which go to tell of a retiring household. Then came silence. Then, again, came soft footsteps in the hall. They grew silent before his door. Was the owner of the feet listening?

Such was Rube's occupation, and he soon heard another sound, as though a chair had been moved and set down close to the door.

"A spy!" he thought.

He looked up at the transom. Something tipped it just the least fraction, and the light in the hall, which was always left burning at night, darted a band of yellow into the detective's room.

As chance would have it, it fell fairly upon the bed, and the dummy figure therein was thrown into prominence.

Round-up Rube changed his own position as expeditiously as he dared, for he was sure that a spy was at the transom; but, even when he had gained the desired spot, he could not see any one.

Something else he did hear, and he knew that the spy had stepped down out of the chair.

He crossed the floor quickly. Before then he had oiled the lock of his room-door until he could turn back the bolt without noise, and this he proceeded to do now.

Then he opened it softly.

The hall was deserted, but, looking higher, he saw a female figure just disappearing on the next floor, at the head of the stairs. Who it was he could not tell, but he was not disposed to rest easy and miss the chance of knowing. There were peculiar women in Malachi Landgrove's house, but why should any woman wish to spy upon him unless her conduct was an offshoot of the recent tragedy?

The detective moved lightly up the stairs.

When he reached the second floor he found only darkness and silence, and he went on to the third. There it was the same.

Temporarily baffled, but not yet ready to admit defeat, he sat down on the upper stair and waited, watched and listened. At least fifteen minutes passed, and he decided that the prowler would not reappear. He descended to the lower floor and re-entered his own room.

As he had left the door unlocked he was by no means certain that he was the only tenant of the place, so he lighted the lamp and looked around. There was no prowler to dispute possession with him.

He was about to extinguish the light again when he was impressed with the idea that the dummy in the bed had changed position, somehow.

The strangeness of the idea led him to make prompt examination, and a surprise followed. In the white spread which covered the bed was a narrow, clean gash, which looked remarkably like that a knife would make.

The first shock of this discovery was followed by the recollection that it might have been there before; but meditation caused him to remember that he had carefully arranged the spread, working it into natural curves and lines, and the necessity of positive proof caused him to turn back the bedclothes.

The dummy had a gash at a point just

under the gash in the spread, and near where the heart of a sleeping person would have been!

Round-up Rube stood erect, and his keen eyes flashed swift glances around the room. Instinctively his hand sought a revolver he carried, and the attitude was that of a man called upon to repel the attack of an enemy.

And an enemy had been near, for it was an incontrovertible fact that an attempt had just been made upon his life. Whoever had dealt the blow which made the gash had intended forever to silence Isaac Perkins, detective. If he had been sleeping where the dummy lay, he would have been a dead man then.

Experienced as Marshall was in wild life this event stirred him not a little. The attempt had been silent and mysterious; the whole thing bewildered and perplexed him.

Who had the would-be assassin been?

What had become of that person?

Crime thrived in, and around, that house, and Round-up Rube was now the menaced person!

CHAPTER XIII.

SALLY HOOKS'S DELAYED REVENGE.

THE detective was not long in recovering his usual coolness. Whoever the guilty person had been, he, or she, had made an escape, and Rube was at once freed from immediate danger and deprived of the chance to solve the mystery.

He examined the gash more carefully, and decided that it must have been made by a strong arm, though not necessarily that of a man.

He did not believe its owner had been a man.

Of those who came and went freely in the house he was most suspicious of the women, for they had proved the most perplexing and suggestive of guilty secrets.

He considered how the several persons slept. Stevens, alone, was on the lower floor; Mrs. Sally Hooks and Kate Graham occupied the upper regions; while Landgrove, Jeffords, Rachel and Mazette slept on the second floor.

Whom was he to suspect?

If it was admitted that the spy at the transom had been the user of the knife, it seemed that she had retreated to the second floor and entered some room there. And there was not an unoccupied room in that part of the house.

This was very suggestive, but he did not fail to see certain possibilities. There was a closet on the second floor which opened into the hall, and the skulker might have entered that, remained until he passed, and then emerged and crept down the stairs to do the dark deed already planned.

But what had become of her, afterward?

As he had been on the upper floor, she had not gone there at once, certainly; and this fact seemed to throw fresh suspicion upon those who had quarters on the second floor.

The only women there were Rachel and Mazette.

Rube, however, did not condemn either of them recklessly. He saw that it had been possible for the user of the knife to skulk on the ground-floor until after he descended, and then retreat wherever she saw fit. He found himself mentally using the pronoun "she" whenever he thought of the knife-user, and the belief that such had been the unknown's sex was strong.

In any case, it was plain that the unknown was very much in earnest. His life had been attempted deliberately. More than that, he would be a hunted man from that time. He was putting somebody in jeopardy by investigating Amos Smith's death, and the guilty party had decided to cover crime with crime.

When he had gone over the case fully, in meditation, he removed the dummy and put everything to rights. Then he again extinguished the light, but did not go to bed. Instead, he waited a few minutes and then opened the window and slipped out quietly.

The grounds looked peaceful and beautiful. Where none of the big trees cast a shadow it was somewhat light, and to wander along the tastefully-arranged walks would have been romantic and pleasant enough for any taste, but love seemed to thrive less there than crime.

Marshall did not patronize the walks. Between them were dark shadows, and, as secrecy was his stock in trade, he kept where he would be less likely to attract attention.

In this way he went on until the extremity of the garden was reached. Then he paused in the cover of bushes, leaned upon the fence, and looked out toward the completed part of the Sacred Comet and the wall of rock yet to be conquered.

The gravel of the walk near him grated under human feet; he turned and saw a woman.

She moved with almost cat-like caution, and in a way fitly described as stealthy and gliding. It was Mrs. Sally Hooks!

Round-up Rube stood like a statue. He felt sure that the housekeeper was not abroad with any trivial object, and was anxious to learn what had called her there. She went to the fence, and, leaning upon it, stood within ten feet of the detective, while she, too, looked away toward the north—and looked very intently, too.

"A woman of mystery!" thought Marshall. "I don't understand Sally, but she is worth in-

vestigating. She does not look or act like one naturally evil, but folks of some merit are often led into misdemeanors by inexorable circumstances. Sally certainly has a secret. What is it?"

Ten minutes passed, and then the detective discovered another person advancing at a quick pace, his course being from the quarter where the Sacred Comet cut the surface of the ground in twain.

As he came nearer another familiar form was revealed—it was Dick Beech.

Rube grew interested. It looked like a rendezvous, and he was curious to know what connection the boatman had with Mrs. Hooks.

The latter called out as Beech neared the fence:

"Dick!"

"So you're here, old woman?" the boatman replied.

"Yes: I've been waiting for you."

"Did it hurt ye?"

"I'm not complaining, Dick—"

"It wouldn't do ye no good ef you did!" he retorted, rudely, as he, too, leaned against the fence.

"I have no fault to find."

"Wal, wal, say it ag'in!"

Mrs. Hooks sighed.

"Is there any news, Dick?" she asked, after a pause.

"Naw."

"Nobody has questioned you?"

"Naw."

"You must be on your guard if they do."

"See hyar, old woman, don't you s'pose I kin take keer of myself?"

"It isn't that, Dick, but because I am so interested in you. You are my nephew—"

"We're probably both proud of it!"

The fellow's persistent rudeness was of a radical nature, and plainly gave Mrs. Hooks pain, but she bore it as she had said, uncomplainingly.

"Your mother was my only sister," she went on, humbly, "and I can't forget the tie of blood."

"I say you hev forgot it!" Dick retorted, fiercely.

"How have I failed in my duty?"

"You went into Malachi Landgrove's house long years ago, promising me to avenge my mother upon him. I was only a kid, but I was up to snuff, even then. Yes; you swore to avenge me an' my mother. What steps have you took to do it? Twelve years in the family is your record. Now, give in yer report! What hev you done?"

"Dick, I am only a woman—"

"I know it, by Judas!"

"What do you mean?"

"You've gone soft."

"Soft?"

"It's my belief you've fell dead in love with old Malachi, an' would sell out me an' my mother ter be his wife!"

"Indeed, Dick, you are wrong," Mrs. Hooks answered, hurriedly.

"I don't believe ye."

"Landgrove would not look at me."

"He looked at my mother, your sister."

"You forget that twenty-seven years have passed since then, and that I am now almost fifty years old. Besides, your mother was always far prettier than I. Margaret Arnold was a lovely girl!"

"Mebbe you bank on brains to ketch Malachi?"

"Dick!"

"Wal!"

"I assure you that you're wholly wrong; even if I had such a wild idea, he would not marry his servant."

"Wal, when you went inter his house, didn't you swear ter avenge my mother on him?"

"Yes."

"Hev you kept that oath?"

"No; but you must remember I am only a woman, and not brave at that."

"I still believe you're sweet on Malachi, but let that pass. No! Hullo! Why can't our ends be served by jest that move? Ef you marry the old duck, we kin finger the Landgrove dollars an' have a jolly time. Try it! I don't keer so much for revenge as I do for cash. Wade in!"

"Dick, let us not think of this until the case of Amos Smith is settled."

"Amos is settled!"

"But the investigation?"

"Hang that part of it. I'll bet a dollar ag'in a red herring that old Ike Perkins gits left!" Round-up Rube, listening greedily, smiled in a grim fashion.

"That man makes me shiver!" declared Mrs. Hooks, and proved her assertion by a shudder.

"Bah!" growled the boatman.

"Dick I want you to keep away from him!"

"I ain't afereed of the old toddler."

"I am!"

"Say, you're a healthy specimen, old woman! You make me think of a dog skulkin' fur kiver when he knows his master has got a stick. Now, you let up on your dramatics! Come down to bed-rock! When you went inter Malachi's house you swore ter be revenged on him, an' it

must come ter pass. Margaret Arnold was my mother an' your sister, an' relationship an' love demands that we revenge her."

Dick was vicious and in earnest, but Rube saw a brief smile flit across the fellow's face as he referred to the demands of love. Even he saw how absurd it was for him to take such a lofty position—and regarded it as a huge joke.

"I'll do what I can, Dick," agreed Mrs. Hooks, with a sigh.

"Ef other means fail, I kin ruin Malachi. Them canal laborers are lively chaps, an' I hev made myself solid with them. They ain't overly satisfied with things hyar, an' it wouldn't take much ter set 'em on ther high boss. Imagine the whole blessed gang, Italians, Bohemians, Russians, Spaniards, niggers, Portuguese, Irish an' Yanks, let loose in riot!"

"No, no!" gasped Sally Hooks.

"I say, yes! Ef we can't rule, we'll ruin. The gang would clean out Red Lake town in the jump of a line-backed flea!"

There was gloating triumph in the ruffian's voice and manner, but Mrs. Hooks's face, revealed by the starlight, bore an expression of horror which Rube Marshall did not fail to see.

The discovery that Sally was Dick Beech's aunt, and had gone into Landgrove's family for the purpose of revenge, was most important, but the detective had never thought so well of her as at that moment.

Whatever she had done, or might do in the future, she was not evil naturally.

"Wal," Dick added, when the housekeeper failed to respond, "I'm off. This time I won't set no date ter see ye ag'in, fur I can't be runnin' around ter see women all the while; it's a waste o' time."

"Dick," Mrs. Hooks cried, with sudden energy, "you'll be careful, won't you?"

"Careful, what d'ye mean now?"

"Keep away from Isaac Perkins! Keep away, or he may bring you to ruin!"

CHAPTER XIV.

JEFFORDS'S CONTRADICTORY CONDUCT.

DICK BEECH had turned half-away, but he now wheeled, faced Mrs. Hooks, and thrust his hands far down into his pockets with that peculiar gesture so common to him, and so indicative of brute stubbornness.

"Say, d'ye think that old duffer kin beat me?" he demanded, with his usual coarseness.

"I'm afraid of him!"

"Just like me—I ain't. An' I'll prove it, yet, Perkins! Why, he's grayer than the blind canal boss! He do me up? Hum!"

"Dick," quaveringly asked the housekeeper, "have you found your knife, yet?"

"No, I ain't."

"Where do you think it went to?"

"Dunno!"

"Don't you think you'd better leave Red Lake for awhile—"

The boatman made a fierce gesture.

"Now, you let up! I won't be dictated to, an' won't be driven out o' Red Lake. I don't care a rap for Perkins, an', even ef he should git evidence ag'in me, I'd be willin' ter fight him on his own ground. Let it rest there."

"Would that Smith had never come here!"

"He got what he deserved. My conscience ain't makin' no stir in me."

If Round-up Rube had been a less observing and careful man, it is probable that he would have arrested Mr. Dick Beech then and there, but such an idea did not enter his mind.

Sally Hooks's fears for Dick, her warning, her request that he would leave the town, and his own peculiar reply, seemed to be very strong evidence that Dick had killed Smith. Yet, Rube was not satisfied.

The boatman's swaggering bravado was open to more than one construction.

From the first he had shown an inclination to bully Mrs. Hooks; to oppose his brute strength to her own weakness; to make himself out a hero; and, even with all the allusions he had heard, the detective was not sure of his ground.

Was Dick the slayer of Smith?

Obviously Mrs. Hooks thought so. Possibly she knew such to be the fact; perhaps she only suspected it; but, in any case, her nervousness had been explained. Brute that the boatman was, she loved him, and, believing that he had slain Smith, she was in a panic lest he be accused by others.

"For my sake, Dick, be careful," she implored. "You don't know what it is to live in yonder house, with the shadow of a violent death upon it, with every one wondering, and with old Perkins's sharp eyes watching me. At times, my heart is like ice!"

"Nonsense!"

"Do me justice, Dick."

"Do yourself justice!"

"I can bear it, if only you are careful."

"They don't want ter annoy me," affirmed the boaster. "I ain't any use fur them, an' won't stand no meddlin'. Ef old Perk gets troublesome, I'll fix him!"

Mrs. Hooks was not reassured, and she continued to sound warnings until the boatman ended the interview abruptly and stalked away toward the shanty where the canal-workers lived, breathed, and had their being.

The housekeeper watched him out of sight, sighed, turned and hurried toward the house.

Rube did not attempt to stop her, nor did he leave his covert at once; he wanted time to think. He had rarely met with a case more puzzling than the present one, and was uncertain where to place his suspicions.

If it was admitted that Dick Beech had killed Smith, how was Mazette Duane's confusion to be accounted for? and what meant Kate Graham's pointed charges against Mark Jeffords? That all these persons, so different in tastes and interests, had been concerned in the crime was not to be believed.

"They must have time and plenty of rope," the shrewd detective thought. "Rush the case and all will be spoiled; move slowly, and the actual slayer is going to put a foot in the trap!"

Falling back upon this philosophical line of reasoning, he returned to the house. There was no sign of Mrs. Hooks, and he locked himself in his room. He did not fail to search carefully before retiring, for the gaping wound in the bed-covers was proof that some person thirsted for his life. He did not care to receive a blow from that unknown hand that had sped the knife before.

Had it been Dick Beech's?

Or Mrs. Hooks's?

Somehow, the detective did not accept either version of the case, and he went to bed in a maze of doubt and uncertainty.

Sound sleep blessed him that night, however.

In the morning the family met at the breakfast table, and he looked at each one critically. He was poorly rewarded. Landgrove was the thoughtful, genial host of old; Jeffords was polite and just sociable enough; while Rachel and Mazette had but little to say, and, as usual, evinced unspoken aversion to Perkins.

If the knife-user was there, the fact made no change in the user's manner.

"It's a royal battle," thought Rube, "but the fruit must fall. The more stubborn the game, the more interest there is in rounding it up!"

After breakfast he went outside the house and paced back and forth, smoking and meditating. After awhile he saw Landgrove and Stevens start toward the garden, the latter carrying a spade, and he started to join them.

His way was past the sitting-room window, and, as he reached that point, two well-known voices sounded in his ears. It was Jeffords who spoke first, and the quick retort was in Rachel's clear tones.

"Perkins may be offensive, but I think he means well."

"And I think him the most odious man living!"

As Miss Landgrove severely made this assertion she swept aside the hanging window-curtains, and she and the self-styled Mr. Perkins stood face to face, separated by only a few feet.

He had paused unconsciously, and thus placed himself in a false position. He realized this before the indignant flashing of Rachel's eyes betrayed the fact that she had placed the worst construction upon his position.

"Well, sir what do you want?" she demanded.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Landgrove—"

"For what?" she interrupted.

"I seem to have offended."

"Do your duties as a man-hunter demand that you listen outside windows while others talk?"

Rube's disguise did not hide the flush which arose to his face.

"You wrong me!" he exclaimed. "I have not acted the listener, or had any idea of it."

"Then your position is against you."

"So it is, but it is counterfeit evidence. I was merely passing the windows, and, I assure you, did not listen for even a second."

He saw Jeffords smile skeptically, but Rachel paused only for one comment and then again dropped the curtain.

"You are welcome to all you heard!"

The ex-cowboy had lost his views of Paradise, and he wandered on, but in a frame of mind far from happy.

"How she hates me!" he thought. "And how she will hate me in my true character when she learns the duplicity of which I am guilty!"

The pang which this thought gave him was capable of but one construction, and he did not fail to construe it aright.

He knew that he was very much interested in Malachi Landgrove's daughter.

Rube had lost all interest in the gardening operations, and he avoided Landgrove and Stevens, and walked along the edge of the town toward the northwest.

Thus it was that he finally encountered Jimmy Rob. The worthy cook had finished his work and gone out for an airing. In his opinion Nature was a thing far more pleasant to look at than the whisky-bottles and playing-cards left by canal laborers. He did not recognize Rube until the latter spoke, and, even then, was reluctant to believe.

"It's no wonder that you round up a scamp when you set out," he averred, "fur I do declare you ain't yerself when you're somebody else—I mean, when you are disguised."

"Thanks, Rob. Any news?"

"Not a fraction."

"Was Dick Beech out last night?"
 "He was, fur awhile, but come in early. I s'pose, Rube, you're enjoyin' yerself over at Landgrove's, as long's Miss Rachel is there."
 "Don't mention it!" was the gloomy reply.
 "Mr. Jeffords is a fine man."
 "You know him, then?"
 "Oh! yes; he used ter come an' see me often; an' he asked more questions about the Sacred Comet than you could shake a stick at. He wa'n't friendly to it, first off."

"How do you know?"
 "All his questions ter me was so p'inted that it showed he was arter unfavorable evidence. I thought, first thing, that he had come hyar ter bust up the canal scheme."

"Why should he?"
 "I dunno. One day he asked me a lot o' questions an' then left. I s'posed he'd gone home; but, after a bit, I went fur a pail o' water, an' found him out back o' the shanty, writin' away with a lead-pencil fur dear life. He shoved all his paper inter his pocket when he seen me, as though skeered; but I pretended not ter notice him, an' went on. Then I seen him close up his job, put the writin's in an envelope, and rush off to the post-office."

Rube gazed at Jimmy in thoughtful silence. Here was evidence from an unimpeachable source that Mark Jeffords had been led to Red Lake by some motive out of the ordinary channel.

"That ain't all," added the cook, who was in an unusually talkative mood. "When Amos Smith come hyar he called on me once, an' asked a good many questions. They was woundedly like Mark's, an' sorter led on fer me ter speak ag'in' the Sacred Comet."

"His enmity was open."
 "Yes. Well, jest arter he went out, in came Mark, an' he asked me what Smith wanted. I told him, an' I declare that Jeffords turned pale."

"Ef Smith comes ag'in, deceive him!" cried the secretary. "The scoundrel is tryin' ter hurt the canal, an' his pryin' must be stopped. Don't give him one p'int, Rob," says Mark; 'don't do it! Protect the Sacred Comet at all hazards!'"

"Now," Jimmy went on, "what I want ter know is this: Why did Mark turn pale at the idee o' Smith hurtin' the canal, when he had been tryin' ter git the same sort o' information? I want ter know that!"

So did Marshall want to know it, but he could not grasp the key to the mystery; it baffled him.

CHAPTER XV.

ORDERED INTO EXILE.

MARK JEFFORDS had left the town office of the Sacred Comet, where he had work to do occasionally, and returned to Landgrove's house, where the greater part of his duties was done in the canal president's private office.

In the upper hall he met Mazette. He had not seen her alone since the talk they had in the lower hall, just before she went to give her testimony to Isaac Perkins, and he was now struck by the change in her appearance.

"Are you ill?" he asked.
 "Not in body," she replied.
 "This affair is wearing upon you."

"Yes."
 "Rest easy; it will soon be over."
 "How will it end?"

Jeffords looked into her large, dark eyes with a peculiar expression.

"Our venerable detective friend will fail."
 "Are you sure?"
 "Yes."

"I am not so confident."
 "He will fail because he cannot grasp the clew to the mystery. Give him that, and he will make short work of it, perhaps. But he has no ordinary case to deal with, and will naturally turn just where investigation will do no good. I'll wager something he has not yet found an item of evidence!"

If the private secretary believed what he said, he was far wide of the mark; but there was room to suspect that he did not believe. In every way the fact was patent that he was anxious to sooth and reassure the girl of the dusky eyes. There was sympathy—almost tenderness—in his manner; and he took one of her hands in his with a gesture which was like a caress.

Mazette shivered, but did not withdraw her hand.

"I wish it was over!" she whispered.

"Be of good cheer; it won't last long."

"That man Perkins affects me strangely. When I look at him, something seems to whisper to me, 'He is, yet he is not; you see him, but see him not.' Don't laugh at me!"

"I had no thought of it."

"I feared you would, for my words seemed wild even to myself. I can't explain how Perkins affects me, but the idea dawns upon me that he is a man far more able than we thought, at first. I tell you there are strong powers of discernment back of his mild manner and benign gaze!"

"Perhaps I had better question Sheriff Ball delicately, and learn just how able Perkins is," thoughtfully remarked Jeffords.

"I advise you to do so."

"Yet, with ordinary luck, he need not be feared."

"Don't rest easy in that belief!" Mazette exclaimed. "I fear that man!"

"Be calm; I will protect you."

"But you?"

"Don't think me vain, Mazette, but I feel capable of dealing with Isaac."

"Beware of him!—beware!"

The girl uttered the words in a tone not above that she usually used, but with a concentrated vehemence that affected Jeffords not a little. He experienced an uncomfortable feeling, as though he were listening to a veritable prophetess who had foretold evil, and was not to be disputed.

"If it comes to a fight," he added, after a pause, "I will fight this detective on his own ground. He must do no damage. You and I, Mazette, are allies, and we must be faithful one to the other, and ready to help one another. Shall it be so?"

Still standing hand in hand, they looked into each other's eyes with a world of meaning. There was tenderness in Mark Jeffords's way, but, with them both, there was more, far more. A solemnity, darkly shadowed by the fear and nervous suspense which was in both minds, made the compact one as somber and sad as a death-bed parting.

What secret had the twain which need make their lives so gloomy?

They still stood with clasped hands when a third person hurried out of a door at the other end of the hall, and Mark recognized Kate Graham, the female servant. He dropped Mazette's hand, and both tried to be calm and, outwardly, at ease, but their hopes of carrying the incident through lightly were not to be blessed with success.

Jeffords saw that Kate's eyes were flashing, and that her face bore a rigid look; and his previous experience with her told of a storm to come.

It was not delayed.

"So you're making love!" she exclaimed, in a voice at once low, deep and sibilant.

"Kate!" reprovingly returned the secretary.

"Oh! I saw you hold her hand and hover over her like a turtle dove."

"Nonsense!"

"It's nonsense, is it? Well, I can convince you it ain't. It's got to stop!"

"To what do you refer?"

"This love-making."

"Kate, you are absurd. You have twisted a very simple affair into—"

"Oh! what fools you men be! You think you can blind a woman, but you can't do it. Fool a woman! Humph! do you suppose an owl could fool a hawk in daytime? Let up on it! This love-making must stop. I've got a claim on you, Mister Jeffords!"

"Nonsense!"

"Don't you dare to deny it!" cried Kate, clenching her hand. "I ain't a person to be put down, and don't you forget it!"

Mazette had been listening in surprise and alarm. She now made an effort to calm the handsome, but masculine kitchen-maid, and soothingly declared:

"Whatever you mean, I will not stand in your way. You have no cause to fear me—"

"Right! You've got to go!"

"Go?"

"Levant! Quit the claim! Get out!"

"Kate, this is most intemperate language," interrupted Jeffords, in disgust. "Don't let us hear any more of it!"

"I'll see you later!" was the swift retort.

"Just now I am addressing Miss Mazette Duane, if that be her name. Miss French-blood; you ain't wanted here, and you must leave this house, this town, and Bighorn Valley!"

"She will do nothing of the kind!"

Jeffords made the assertion angrily, but Kate did not heed him. All her attention was upon Mazette, and she pursued the subject as only a jealous woman can.

"Will you leave here, at once and forever?" she went on, inexorably.

"You ask a good deal," faltered Mazette, at a loss what to say or do.

"I ask you to turn your back on us for good; to go into exile."

"And I say she will do nothing of the kind," firmly repeated Jeffords.

"Go slow, you two. I don't rely upon your good-will to get obedience, but on fear. That's the lever to move you. Listen, you two! Ever since Amos Smith was killed, you have told a lie and stuck to it; you repeated the lie when like Perkins questioned you. Both of you say you were not in the garden the evening that Smith was killed. That's a falsehood!"

Mazette changed color, and even the secretary could find no words of denial at that moment.

"You were in the garden, and together. I can swear to that! And where was Amos Smith at that time? Not in his room, for I knocked on the door to give him a pitcher of water. There was no answer, so I put the pitcher into the room anyhow. He was not there; he had gone out. Where? Not the front way, for I had been where I should have seen him. Well, he went to the garden—to where you two were then—and he never came back!"

The relentless young woman brought her speech to a close and looked at them in triumph.

And her wish to make trouble was not more apparent than her ability to do it.

She had fought them to a standstill, as it were, and neither broke the silence that followed her last startling words.

Jeffords was dismayed, and Mazette was overwhelmed with consternation, and Kate appeared to be mistress of the situation.

CHAPTER XVI.

A TROUBLESOME WOMAN.

THE necessity of prompt and energetic action was so apparent and imperative that Jeffords made an effort to rally.

"Kate, I can't see why you are so hostile," he answered, mildly.

"You know very well, Miss French-blood wants you, and so do I, and we can't both have you. All's fair in love and war, and I am going to make a fight for it. You hadn't dare defy me, for I shall tell that you were in the garden when you swore you were not."

"Slowly, Kate! If I falsified, how about you? You claimed, and so told Perkins, that you did not see Smith after he retired, or go near him, or have knowledge of him. If you confess, now, that you went to his room; that you knew he had gone out, and yet denied all such knowledge, you will put your own neck in jeopardy."

"Nonsense! The fact would not hurt me, anyhow, and I should add that I kept silent for your sake."

"Would you be believed?"

"Yes."

"I doubt it."

"A good deal of rope is given the party who furnishes the clew to a murder mystery, and helps to put the law on track of the assassin."

"You claim to care for me. Would you, if I were guilty, which I am not, betray me?"

"Unless you rewarded me—yes!"

"You're a fine specimen!"

"I claim no great stock of honor, but I'm bound to make a good fight. Remember that I know you hated Smith; that you were bound he should not go away and tell unfriendly things about the Sacred Comet, and that I have a certain letter of yours. Do you want these things made public?"

Mark Jeffords did not. All this was apparent in his manner, but he did not answer. His corrugated forehead showed him trying to find a way out of the dilemma.

"Having the case in my own hands," Kate added, "I am able to dictate terms. I demand that yonder girl leave Red Lake at once!"

Jeffords looked pitifully at Mazette, and found her regarding him earnestly.

"It shall be as you say," she murmured.

The secretary had an inspiration.

"Such a step would be madness at this juncture," he asserted. "For any member of this household to go suddenly would be to arouse suspicion. All must remain until the investigation is over."

This argument had effect upon Kate.

"If she could only go naturally!" muttered the schemer.

"That cannot be."

"I'll fix it!" was the confident reply. "Miss Rachel must discharge Mazette."

"That's easier said than done."

"I tell you I can fix it."

"How?"

"Mazette must do something which will anger Rachel, and I don't know of any better way than to make that something an act which shall threaten to involve Malachi Landgrove in the murder!"

The coolness with which this plan was laid showed Kate to be an adept at scheming, as well as a woman of no scruples. With an end to accomplish she was willing to sacrifice anything and anybody.

"I refuse to become a party to your project," Mark declared. "You are too headlong, and will ruin us all. One thing I insist upon: The matter must rest right here until enough time has elapsed so that Isaac Perkins will not have his eyes upon us all. You, too, must yield something, Kate, or else, being bent for ruin, I will go down with colors flying, and fight every one who opposes me!"

His own firmness was showing then, and it made impression upon Kate. Before that day she had learned that the secretary had plenty of determination, and it occurred to her that it might be well not to rush matters too much.

After a pause she slowly asked.

"Can I trust you?"

"Yes."

"But you have made no promise."

"No."

"Will you?"

"I will not! Being an innocent man, I am going to keep my manhood intact. When the proper time has come to consider the case it shall be considered, but not a promise will I make. I'll wear nobody's fetters!"

This independent assertion impressed Kate quite as favorably as milder methods would have done; the very fact that he did not yield to her wholly seemed to her proof that she had gained a point.

"So be it, then, but—"

She paused, looked at Mazette, hesitated, and then added:

"There must be no more love-making with her!"

"Not a word of love ever passed between us."

"I can read the signs, and I know you are mashed on each other. Don't let me see any more of it!"

Just then the voice of Mrs. Hooks arose from the lower floor, calling Kate's name, and the girl turned away reluctantly. She paused at the head of the stairs, tempted to order Mazette to descend with her, but the knowledge that she could not keep the pair apart, anyway, prevented the step.

"Remember!" she said, significantly, dramatically; and then her voice, arose louder, as the housekeeper called a third time, and she cried in true servant dialect: "Comin', ma'am!"

It was a descent from the tragic to the ridiculous, and Kate sunk into her old sphere as she ran down the stairs, but neither Mazette nor Mark felt amused by the transformation. When her footsteps ceased to be heard, the secretary spoke in a low voice.

"She is fettered for awhile."

"Oh! Mark, I fear her so!" Mazette whispered.

"Fear nothing! I am here to defend you, and defend you I will, while I live!"

"You are very good."

"Mazette, this new crisis draws us nearer each other. In the face of a common danger, we may well think, act, hope alike. Our interests are one; let us be more to each other than we have been!"

Again he took her hand, and the interview seemed to have gone back where Kate had interrupted it. But, though Mark looked into Mazette's eyes, she did not meet his regard; she looked down, and trembled perceptibly. He even thought there was a movement of her hand, as though she would withdraw it.

Slight things change the current of events, and this matter, half-defined as it merely was, checked the young man's speech.

A wave of feeling of another nature rolled over Jeffords, and he could hardly avoid releasing her hand abruptly. He, too, shivered; he had been on the brink of a step so rash that he wondered, now, at his own forgetful folly.

He pitied Mazette; he loved her; but, in his calmer moments, would have looked upon the project of marriage with her as madness. A gulf lay between them, only vaguely painted on the canvas of the past; yet it was a grim and forbidding shadow of the present, and an iron barrier, it seemed, of the future.

With an effort he regained power of utterance and went on, but he felt awkward, and was aware that something of this must show in his voice.

"We will fight together, Mazette. No one person can monopolize all the sorrow in the world, and those who get their share to-day, may rise superior to annoyances to-morrow. Let there be trust between us. If you need help, come to me. If you want to confide in any one, your trust in me, if given, shall be respected to the fullest degree."

"You are kind!—you are noble!" she declared, but a sigh followed the words.

She could not forget the secret of their lives, individual and collective, known and suspected.

"Now, I will let you leave me, for the prying detective may appear, and I want none of our affairs known to him."

They shook hands and separated. Jeffords went to the office and dropped wearily into a chair.

"Troubles multiply!" he muttered, gloomily. "I lose my head when with her; I defy the episode of New York and the shadows of Red Lake. Where will all this end? Whither am I drifting?"

CHAPTER XVII.

MORE ABOUT THE KNIFE.

MALACHI LANDGROVE and Mr. Isaac Perkins were seated in the latter's office, in the Post-office Block, when a third person entered.

He was a man older than Landgrove, and had a look somewhat patriarchal, on account of his long white beard.

"Mr. Perkins, this is Mr. Pomeroy Ash, one of our directors," Landgrove explained, and the men thus introduced shook hands.

"Any news, Ash?" Landgrove continued.

The director glanced at Perkins.

"Speak freely," directed the former speaker.

"I have a letter from a stockholder."

"In regard to the Sacred Comet?"

"Yes."

"What does he say?"

"He wants to re-sell his stock to us."

"Ah! the first gun of the campaign!" exclaimed the canal president. "I expected this."

"Fortunately, the man is too late."

"He is amply early. He shall have his money back!"

Ash was astonished.

"You don't mean it!" he cried.

"We will take the stock back. All this is the result of Amos Smith's interference. He did

not live to give his opinion verbally in the East, but he speaks from the grave. Some of the papers have got hold of the fact that he was not impressed favorably with the Sacred Comet, and ill news travels fast. Our weak-kneed stockholder will not be the last to ask for a chance to back out."

"If you favor one—"

"I shall favor all—or, at least, give my vote and influence to that end."

"Do you mean that you will let others withdraw?"

"Every man that wishes; the Sacred Comet wants no scared men and no millstones. The way to keep up confidence in it is to show confidence, ourselves. If there is a 'run' upon a bank, and it meets all demands freely, the panic will soon end. In this way we must stifle the trail of disaster springing from Smith's work and death."

Landgrove spoke with such firmness and dignity, yet with an air of deep sorrow underlying all, that Round-up Rube could not but sympathize with him.

If he was sincere in his avowed purpose to tunnel the ridge, and make the canal a thing of fact and action, it was the ambition of his life, the scheme into which he had put his money, and the business struggle of his declining years.

To have it end in ruin would be a great blow, yet that was the fate which then menaced the enterprise.

Shrewd detective that Round-up Rube was, he was now affected by appearances, and inclined to believe that Malachi Landgrove was as honest as his friends believed him to be.

Director Ash's hand trembled as he smoothed his patriarchal beard.

"I have a good deal of faith in your judgment, Malachi," he returned, "but I hate to see this go as you say. Every dollar I have in the world is in the Sacred Comet, and to have the enterprise collapse, would leave me a beggar in my old age."

"Friend Ash, better lose our money than our honor!"

"But we abate no jot or tittle of our honor by holding the stockholders to their bargains. They have invested in a legitimate speculation, and, surely, no one has done more than we. We have put in our all!"

"We cannot measure by that standard. Strangely enough, our good faith has been doubted and assailed; men who have never seen the ground have given firm opinions that the canal project is a fraud. I tell you, Pomeroy, we must stop this clamor, and the quickest way to strangle the serpent of doubt is to cast off every weakling among our adherents. I am in favor of taking back every share offered to us. It may ruin us financially, but our honor will stand unimpeached and unimpeachable!"

Delivering this opinion in a ringing voice, the President of the Sacred Comet rose to his feet and stood with his head held proudly aloft.

There was magnetism in his manner, and Ash, too, arose, like one moved by uncontrollable forces, and clasped his colleague's hand.

"You are right, Malachi; you are right!" he cried. "We will do as you say. It may bring ruin, but one thing we'll save from the wreck—our honor!"

It was no mean picture to see the two tall, white-bearded men as they stood thus, hand in hand, and that they were deeply moved could not be denied. Tears rolled down Ash's furrowed cheeks, and even Landgrove's eyes glistened with moisture.

"Thank you, Pomeroy; thank you!" he made answer, brokenly.

There was silence for some time, and then Landgrove relaxed his hold and sat down again.

"The full board of directors shall pass upon the question at the earliest possible moment," he added, "and I am sure they will be with me."

"You may count on me, and I think it will be the same with Sidney Tillotson."

"Tillotson is an honorable man, and I anticipate no great trouble in convincing him."

Round-up Rube had nothing to say, but he did not regard the incident as trivial. It was important. If these gray old men were sincere, their stand was both sacrificing and noble; if they were acting a part, to deceive him, the game was well played.

The only thing that counted against them was the fact that they did business so openly which one would expect to find done in secret, but some allowance must be made for impulsive devotion to principle.

Ash did not remain long, but, after a short conversation with the self-styled Mr. Perkins in regard to the Sacred Comet, in which he had the prevailing Red Lake confidence, he went down to see how work was progressing under Superintendent Flanders's directions.

Landgrove turned slowly to the detective.

"Mr. Perkins, a certain thing occurred to me, a few minutes ago, which may prove important," he remarked.

"What was that?"

"Have you traced the ownership of the knife found in Smith's room yet?"

"No, sir."

"Knives abound in Bighorn Valley. Half of the settlers are more or less given to hunting, and every hunter has a knife. To see a weapon of this sort is an every-day occurrence, and does not make an impression on anybody's mind. When you asked me if I located the knife found so strangely, I went over a wide range of events, all bristling with knives, as it were. I had done so before you came, but failed to remember anything of import."

"Naturally."

"Since then a forgotten incident has come back to my memory."

"I shall be pleased to hear it."

Mr. Isaac Perkins spoke with all the carelessness imaginable, but he was not indifferent. Expecting discoveries every moment, almost, he was on the alert to meet them. Malachi had begun somewhat ponderously, and he was curious to know what was coming.

He watched his companion closely, and weighed every expression and word.

"One day, before we had the full gang of laborers at work on the canal," pursued Landgrove, "I was at the shanty on the hill, conducting arrangements with the crowd Jimmy Rob picturesquely calls the Odds-and-Ends Pirates."

"A stranger appeared, who offered for small inducements to perform certain sleight-of-hand tricks. He amused the men for awhile, and then produced several knives, and threw them, juggler-fashion, at various targets. I gave but little heed to him, but am prepared to say he was decidedly skillful."

"When he was done, one of the laborers expressed a desire to buy a knife. The juggler declined at first, but, when offered a fancy price, made the sale. Other men tried to buy, but the stranger declared that the knives were particularly valuable, and that he would not sell at any price."

"As a result, only one sale was made."

"Now, a good deal of time has elapsed since then, and I cannot be sure of the exact appearance of the weapon—I should be reckless to speak positively, since even the incident had been forgotten—but I am persuaded that it was wonderfully like that knife found in Smith's room."

"What became of the juggler?"

"He went his way, I suppose. I know no more about him."

"Who was the laborer who bought the knife?"

"His name is Dick Beech!"

Rube met the speaker's gaze without a change of countenance.

"What do you infer?" he asked.

"Nothing! Far be it from me to create prejudice against any one, but I thought you ought to know this."

"You are right. Have you ever seen this knife since?"

"No."

"What kind of a fellow is Beech?"

"Rough! Whether he is a criminal, in any sense, I don't know, but Flanders has several times complained to me of him; and if we had not wanted every ready hand upon the canal, Beech would have been sent adrift before now. He is particularly sullen and slow of obedience, and Flanders thinks he has a bad effect on the other men."

Remembering what Dick had said to Mrs. Hooks, the ex-cowboy could well believe this.

"Is it your opinion," Rube pursued, "that this Beech's knife killed Amos Smith?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

HE IS ASKED TO LISTEN AGAIN.

LANDGROVE smiled gravely.

"My individual opinion amounts to nothing, and I don't want to harm an innocent man. You will see that there is no evidence against Beech in what I have told, and I cannot say that the two knives are one and the same. I only mention the matter and leave you to act as your judgment directs."

"Do you know anything more against Beech?" asked Marshall, quietly.

"Only that he is rough and troublesome."

"Do you know whether he ever met Smith?"

"No."

"When Smith was killed, he wore your gray overcoat. The possibility has been mentioned that he may have been mistaken for you. Now, if you ever had trouble with Beech, we might infer that he did the deed, thinking he was striking you."

This wily advance, founded upon memory of the recent trouble he had overheard between Landgrove and Beech, was not without result. After the least possible hesitation, Malachi answered steadily, but his gaze did not meet Rube's frankly.

"With the exception of some talk I had with Beech since you came—and it was not of consequence—I have rarely spoken to the man. There had been no quarrel between us which could tempt him to do me injury. We had not had any trouble."

The canal president's answer bore evidence of great caution. Indeed, he had been so cautious that he appeared to add the last sentence to clinch what had gone before. His use of the past tense was worthy of notice.

Rube plainly saw that he did not intend to

divulge the trouble he had had with the boatman since the death of Smith, and the motive which had prompted the story of the juggler's knife became uncertain.

Every word might be true, and his asserted desire not to create prejudice against Dick might be genuine, or, under all, there was, possibly, a deliberate intent to overwhelm the obnoxious boatman.

"I'll look into it," the detective promised, carelessly.

"I had rather not be mentioned."

"Very well."

"Have you any definite theory, as yet?"

"No."

"I trust you'll clear up the mystery."

"I think I shall."

"Do it, and you shall be rewarded. We can't let it go unsolved. As the matter stands now, it may make great trouble for the Sacred Comet. It must be shown that Smith's death was in no way the result of his opposition to the canal."

The president's eyes sparkled, he threw back his head, and ten years seemed to be taken from his age. Whether the Sacred Comet was a genuine or bogus enterprise, it was clear that his heart was in the work.

On the whole, Rube left the office with a better opinion than ever of Malachi Landgrove. True, he had been the chief gainer, it seemed, by Smith's untimely taking-off, but there was no proof to connect him with it; he had been courteous and frank from the first; had shown no evidence of a guilty secret; and appeared to be a high-minded gentleman.

That he should hesitate to confess how Dick Beech was annoying him was natural, for, whether or not he had married a certain Margaret Arnold nearly thirty years before, a sensitive mind would hesitate to acknowledge a scandal which should bring such a low wretch as the boatman into prominence.

Landgrove, never an object of definite suspicion, stepped to a higher plane, and Dick Beech became more than ever a subject fit for inquiry, doubt, suspicion and espionage.

The remainder of the day passed uneventfully, but, when the family met for supper at the house, unfortunate old Mr. Perkins was shown that Rachel had not forgotten the affair of the morning, when she thought she caught him acting the listener at the window.

She gave him an indignant look of the kind of which her sex are particularly capable; which fall like harmless snow-flakes in ordinary cases upon obdurate man, but tear his heart in tatters when the indignant looker is sole mistress of his affections.

Marshall was not a weak sentimentalist, but he felt that his work at Red Lake would not be a success until he had gained Rachel's good opinion.

The following morning venerable Mr. Perkins was not in his room, but a note explained that he had gone away for a short time; that he would be busy on the case, and would soon return.

"He is an erratic worker," thoughtfully remarked Landgrove to Jeffords. "I suppose there is system in his labors, but it does not appear to the ordinary mind. He may be shrewder than he looks and acts, but I confess that I am disappointed in the man. Providence forbid that he makes a failure of the case!"

At that same time there was a noticeable figure on the piazza of the hotel. It was Round-up Rube, dressed in a semi-Mexican costume, and looking so dashing that he caused certain feminine eyes to survey him, openly or secretly, and certain female hearts to flutter.

The ex-cowboy's system of going and coming was about the same at the hotel as at Landgrove's, but he felt little fear that Isaac Perkins and R. Marsh would be associated in anybody's thoughts.

Other men came and went as eccentrically—some went never to return, strangely—and it was a good enough rule in Red Lake for every person to look out for his own affairs, exclusively.

After a while the detective strolled away toward Jimmy Rob's quarters, but he did not reach the shanty without an encounter.

Among the rocks he suddenly met Rachel. Her face lighted up with pleasure, and she accosted him with friendliness and confidence which made him feel his double-life artifice with fresh pricking of conscience.

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Marsh," she declared, in her attractive way.

"Thank you, Miss Landgrove," he awkwardly answered.

"I have something to tell you."

"Ah!"

He felt that it was a stupid response, but he could not bring himself to ask her for revelations inspired by mistaken faith in him.

"Shall I be infringing unpardonably upon your good-nature if I ask you to do some real detective work in the Smith case?"

"If I can help you, Miss Landgrove, I shall be glad to do so."

"It's about that knife!"

Rube moved uneasily. What was coming now?

"Yes," he returned.

"Knives are very common in Red Lake town, and we see them so often, and in so many different hands, that recollection of any particular one soon passes," she continued, unconsciously using the same idea, and almost the same words, used by her father on the previous day. "This explains why I had forgotten a certain circumstance which returned to my mind vividly this morning. I only wonder that I had forgotten it before. You know that I suspect Dick Beech."

"Yes."

"I suspect him more than ever, now."

"Can it be proved he is guilty?" Rube asked, eagerly.

"I hope so."

"Let me hear the evidence."

"One day, two or three months ago," Rachel explained, "I was down by the canal with my father. The hybrid gang of workmen had some trouble in the excavation, and Mr. Flanders was so fearful of something more serious that he ordered every man to ascend the bank and deposit his weapons in a pile."

"The result was that a big heap of revolvers and knives was soon made."

"Just after they had gone back to work, one man who had been away for a while, returned. This was Beech. Flanders stopped him before he reached the bank and gave him the same order."

"Beech remonstrated in his sullen way, at first, but ended by obeying. Upon a rock, away from the other weapons, he put a revolver, and a knife in its sheath. Some influence impelled me, and, when he was out of sight of the excavation, I removed the knife from its cover."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE HEART OF BARREL SINK.

THE speaker paused, leaving Round-up Rube painfully anxious for what would come next. Was there an item of evidence which would so hem in another man that Malachi Landgrove would be proved innocent?

"Well?" the detective questioned, eagerly.

"It was a murderous-looking knife," Rachel resumed, "and, accustomed as I was to such things, I shivered and laid it down hurriedly. That, as I said before, was months ago, and I soon forgot all about it, but my recollection is that the knife was very, very much like that found in Amos Smith's room."

"Did Beech take it back again?"

"I did not wait to see."

"Who else was near the spot?"

"Flanders and father."

"Did they see the knife?"

"Yes."

Rube was silent. He remembered that Landgrove had denied ever seeing the knife after Beech bought it of the strolling juggler.

"At least, I suppose they did," Rachel added.

"Both stood by while the boatman was putting the weapons down. Of course they watched him, for it was the only thing of interest transpiring, and even small things attract our passing attention."

"We have, then, established the fact that Beech had a knife."

"Yes; and that my recollection is that it looked like the one found so strangely. What a horrible thing it is for men to carry knives as they do in the West and South, ready to use them on their fellow-beings under the least provocation!"

"True; and our newspapers teem with tragedies rising from the reprehensible habit."

"Only a brute would do it. I remember that, as I looked at the pile cast down by the canal laborers, I expressed sentiments similar to these. Thomas Flanders laughed at me, and appealed to father to corroborate him in the statement that it was a sign of 'spirit' for men to go armed. I well remember my dear father's reply:

"I never owned but one weapon," he remarked, "and did not keep that long. A short time ago a strolling juggler was through here, and he stopped at the shanty to amuse the men with certain feats, among which was the throwing of knives. I was there and saw him perform."

"He had a dozen of the weapons, and they were so bright and keen that I was fascinated," father admitted, smiling gravely. "I decided that I wanted one of the knives, yet was reluctant to buy in the presence of my rough employees."

"As a result, I played strategy and accosted the juggler privately when he had left the shanty and started on the trail to Duck-bill Drift, and purchased one of the lot. He gave me my choice—all were alike—for a price so high I am ashamed to own it."

"Well, I had my knife, and how it did glitter! I fancied it would answer for a razor, and thought it would be an ornament to my desk, if laid upon it, but it never was placed there."

"Once in the office, I saw the concern in the light of calm common sense, and it looked no better than the knife of a mere ruffian. Disgusted, I locked it up for the day, but it so weighed upon my spirits, and I was so ashamed to have any one know that I had it, that I determined to get rid of it at once."

"I took it while I went to walk, and flung it

into the bottom of Barrel Sink. When it was done I felt easier, and I've never had a knife since."

"So, Flanders, you see that I agree with Rachel, and think that the carrying of such things is a low and ruffianly habit!"

"Such were father's words, and, between us, we silenced Mr. Superintendent Flanders."

Rachel had natural dramatic gifts, and, as she attempted to give her father's own words, she shone strongly as an imitator.

She had forgotten, for the time, matters more serious, and the bright and effervescent side of her nature had full play as she spoke what seemed, to her, trivial words.

To Round-up Rube they were anything but trivial; they furnished a discrepancy so marked, when compared with what Landgrove had said to Rube the day before, that the detective had no inclination to smile in return.

He was troubled afresh.

Landgrove had told him that the juggler made only one sale, and that to Beech; he had confessed to his daughter that he followed the stroller secretly and, himself, had purchased one of the knives.

He had told Rube that he had no idea where the stroller went, but had stated to Rachel that the man started along the trail to Duck-bill Drift.

Unfortunate Rachel, ignorant of where Beech had obtained his knife, had plunged her father into an arena of fresh suspicion by telling the story; nor was that all.

She had said that Beech's weapon resembled that found in Smith's room, and a little later, had repeated her father's assertion that all of the juggler's knives were alike.

If this was so, and the lately-found knife was once the stroller's, it was as likely to have been that bought by Landgrove, as Beech's.

Poor Rachel! It seemed to be her lot to do a vast amount of harm while seeking to do good.

Marshall wished the confidence had never been given him, but he caught at a solitary hope—if Malachi really had thrown his purchase into Barrel Sink, it was there now, probably.

He tried to hide his perturbation.

"Such sentiments are quite correct," he answered. "I, myself, usually carry a revolver; but it's a habit growing out of my wild life. When off hunting, I have to go fully armed, anyhow."

"That is quite different, and to be expected. But about Beech. Do you think the clew of any value?"

"It seems to be."

"Can you investigate it?"

"I can, and will."

"Thank you, Mr. Marsh; you are very kind."

"Don't mention it, pray."

"But I can't help being grateful."

"I only hope I may deserve your gratitude."

"Whatever may be the result, I'm sure you will do your best. I have great faith in Jimmy Rob, who recommended you; and my own intuitions tell me I may trust you fully."

"I hope all will end well."

"With your help, I think it will."

She hesitated for a moment, and then added:

"I hope you will not misconstrue my motives. I am in trouble; help is imperatively necessary, and I dare trust no one here. I think you are too noble to disappoint me."

Round-up Rube wanted to declare that he was the biggest villain alive, and felt that he was, but he did nothing of the kind. They parted, and Rachel left him to blame himself alone.

Every time he saw her he was more than impressed by her many charming qualities, yet he was receiving her confidence in an underhand way, and the information she gave him in confidence might lead to the connection of her father with the crime in the garden.

"I'm a brute!" muttered the honest young man, "and it's a wonder lightning don't strike me; but for every effort I make against Landgrove, I'll make two to save Rachel from sorrow. But this is untimely bewailing. Landgrove told Flanders that he threw the knife down Barrel Sink. It may be there now. I'll look, at once!"

The term, "Barrel Sink," naturally so obscure to one a stranger to the place, had already been explained to him.

Outside of the village was a shaft, or natural hole in the earth, of a form generally circular, and said to be two hundred feet deep. Men had been down in its heart before, and he did not doubt his ability to do the same.

He lost no time in going there.

It was in a wild place, hemmed in by rocks and bushes, and looking forbidding enough with its dark area, but he found a piece of inflammable pine, lighted it, affixed it to his hat, and began the descent.

Generally speaking, the walls of the shaft were sheer, but they sloped here and there, in and out, in irregular inclines, and, by clinging to the points of rock, of which "the Barrel" was exclusively composed, he went slowly down in the gloomy depths.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SECRETS OF THE SHAFT.

It was no easy task to go down the shaft, and Rube had to move slowly and test every foothold before venturing to put his full weight upon it. A more timid man would have turned back, but he was there to succeed, and his courage was good.

At one time, miners had given attention to Barrel Sink. It was a natural shaft, and if gold was to be had in that vicinity, a good deal of labor would be saved by the kindness of Nature in making a way to the under-surface of the earth.

Nothing came of the attempt, and, as absolutely no gold was found, the mining project had been given up years before, but some traces of the toilers remained.

At several points wooden ladders had been fixed to help a climber over the worst places, and Rube found them valuable now.

After a long struggle he reached the bottom. Then he fanned the pine splinter into fresh life. Its light showed the blackest of rocks, damp and grave-like, and looking far up at the minute speck of sky visible, he realized the kindness of Providence in making it the law of nature for him to live, not in a rock-locked tomb like Barrel Sink, but on the surface of a world so fair.

Dismissing these thoughts, he began the search.

Report said that no one had been down the shaft since the gold-seekers abandoned it, and, if that was true, the knife must still be there—if, indeed, Malachi Landgrove had disposed of it as he claimed.

It was not a difficult search. The bottom of the shaft was almost as smooth as a floor, and no loose or refuse matter incumbered it or delayed his search.

When he had swung his torch around, and turned in each direction, he was next to positive that no knife was there, but he did not abandon the hope until he had made the strictest search. This done, he had to face the inevitable.

The knife was not there, and the fact appeared to brand Landgrove's claim as false.

"Where now is hope for Rachel?" the explorer muttered, yielding, momentarily, to the disappointment of the failure.

He shook off the feeling as soon as possible and renewed the investigation. Drifts led away from the shaft, where the miners had labored, and he visited all. He expected to find nothing there, and only sought to explore the place fully. He found nothing.

He was returning to the shaft when there was a sudden, violent shock and the roar of a hundred cannons seemed to break upon his ears. Partially stunned, he stood inactive, and dust floated freely to his nostrils.

Realizing that rock had fallen in the shaft, he made his way there hurriedly, fearing to find himself entombed alive. He was happily disappointed. There was no visible change above, but a boulder lay below, partially imbedded in the soil, and cracked in several pieces.

"That's a close call," the ex-cowboy soliloquized. "If I'd been standing in the shaft when it came down, I should never have known what happened. Odd that it should fall at this moment, when it does not appear to be the rule for boulders above to give way!"

A vague suspicion crept over him.

Had the rock fallen from the side of the shaft, naturally, or had some one cast it over from the top with murderous intentions? No better way could be devised for disposing of a man who was dangerous. He would have given much to be at the top of Barrel Sink, then, where he could use his eyes.

Was an enemy beating a hurried retreat, urged on by guilty ears? Had some one who had cause to dread the result of his researches followed him to the shaft, and tried to bury him and his investigation in the heart of the Sink?

So suspicious was he, he passed some time looking upward, hoping to see a human head while its owner reconnoitered, but this did not occur. He was alone with the silence, the solitude and the mystery.

When confident that nothing was to be gained by waiting, he began the ascent. It was easier than it had been to descend, and he progressed without any great trouble. But he was not to reach the top without another striking experience.

Half-way up, and just as he was passing a winding point, he saw a small white object dangling from a point of rock.

"A handkerchief!" he murmured, and detached it.

The moment that it was brought into stronger light he made a discovery which put the matter out of the list of things trivial. The handkerchief, otherwise fresh and clean, was discolored with a red stain so profuse as to startle him.

"Blood, and in abundance!" he commented.

He gave a critical survey to the walls, and the fact became obvious that the bit of linen could not have been there many days. The whole appearance of the shaft, bottom, sides and top, revealed the further fact that, when rain fell, the sides dripped with water which took a deep color, almost black, from the soil near the surface.

The unmistakable deduction was that no rain

had fallen since the handkerchief had been there. Reflection showed that the last rain had been on the twenty-second of the previous month, three days before Amos Smith was killed.

The association of idea was suggestive.

Rube looked at the handkerchief again, and saw a name neatly marked in indelible ink, in one corner. He read it.

"Malachi Landgrove!"

The detective felt the blood rush to his face.

"Rachel, Rachel!" he groaned, "it was an unfortunate hour when you first mentioned Barrel Sink to me!"

He raised the handkerchief, tempted to tear it to pieces and fling it away, but checked himself.

"Patience!" he added. "I have a duty to perform to the law, and nothing else must stand in the way!"

It was easy to say, but his spirits remained at lowest ebb. Each look at the linen square added to the evidence. Not only was the white portion unsoiled, but the red stains were so fresh that he knew they had been made at a time comparatively recent. And it was fearfully against the President of the Sacred Comet that one of his handkerchiefs was blood-stained at that critical time.

But how came it in Barrel Sink?

This was a mystery which Round-up Rube tried in vain to grasp. If it was admitted that Landgrove had killed Smith, it did not help to explain later events. Why should he fling the tell-tale evidence down the shaft?

Wisdom should have shown him the necessity of forever disposing of such a fatal sign, and he might have burned it in his own house, forever destroying it before any other person knew that Smith was dead.

Barrel Sink was half a mile from Landgrove's house. Had he made the journey, that fatal night, and cast the red clew away? If so, it had been the height of madness, for, even if the shaft had been long left alone, some one was liable to go down at any time.

"It was madness, if he did it," Marshall decided; "but did he? May it not have been the work of an enemy?"

This would have been a pleasant line of argument to follow had it not led to unfavorable results. If the shaft was liable to be explored at any time, it was also liable not to be visited by any human being for years to come. An enemy, it would seem, would have left the handkerchief in a more public place, in order to make capital surely. Again, if Malachi had thrown a knife down, the same impulse might have led him there once more. And who else should have his handkerchief?

But look at the matter as he might, and did, Rube could find no satisfactory explanation.

The motive which had prompted the leaving of this article in the shaft was as mysterious as that which had caused the hiding of that other knife in Smith's room.

Tiring of vain speculations at last, the detective put the offensive thing away in his pocket and completed the ascent.

Once at the top he found abundant evidence that his life had been attempted.

Some one had taken a rock which had been close at hand, rolled it to the edge of the shaft, and pushed it over. Who had done it was a mystery. No one was visible, and the nature of the soil defied Rube's efforts to get the least clew to what the unknown had worn on his feet.

The investigator turned toward the hotel with a heavy heart, and with one idea active in his mind.

The case looked bad for Malachi Landgrove!

CHAPTER XXI.

A NOTE OF ALARM.

If the week which followed brought any developments, the general public did not know of the fact.

Round-up Rube kept up his double-character investigation, and no one not in the secret suspected that the mild, gray-bearded Perkins and the dashing Marsh were one and the same person.

As a rule, the ex-cowboy tried not to be intimate with any one person in both roles.

As R. Marsh he had a speaking acquaintance with Landgrove, Jeffords, Stevens, Beech and Ash, but never allowed himself to be too long in their company. He kept up his acquaintance with Rachel partly secret, but sufficiently open so that he had twice visited her at home, and their acquaintance was generally known. His chief male associate was Sidney Tillotson, who proved a sociable and light-hearted acquaintance, but even with him, Rube never became confidential.

As Isaac Perkins he had made more or less talk with about every person in Red Lake. With a few exceptions the "old man" was liked, but his mild manner had borne fruit; it was the universal opinion that Mr. Perkins was too slow-witted and grandfatherly ever to detect any criminal.

Several times Sheriff Ball had been approached on the subject, and advised to make a change, but that gentleman kept his own counsel and did not lose faith. He had only to look at Rube in his true character to see that he was

alert enough. Whether he was especially fitted for detective work was for the ex-cowboy, himself, to show.

He did not let Ball know how fast he was progressing, but, when questioned, modestly said that he hoped to "round-up" the criminal soon.

Yet, Rube was lagging, and he, himself, knew it, if no one else did. For a week he had not pushed the case as he usually pushed his work. He was down-hearted and discouraged—not by the contradictory evidence he had gathered, but by the fear of success.

If he pressed on he might ensnare Malachi Landgrove, and if he did that, he would break Rachel's heart. At present she liked and trusted him—in his true character—but how she would regard him when his double-dealing became known he could see plainly by observing her treatment of unfortunate Isaac Perkins.

Her fine scorn of that mild old man remained unchanged, and she never neglected a chance to slight or rebuff him. His placidity was great, usually, and she was not positive that she irritated him.

She hoped she did.

If she could have known how much stronger than irritation were her dislike and scorn to him, she would have been amazed. Little did she imagine that he writhed under her verbal and pantomimic castigation as only one can who is wounded in his affections. She stabbed at his mind and nerves and hit his heart!

Mazette Duane appeared to have about the same opinion of Mr. Perkins, but she went no further than to avoid him, and to show by her actions how she disliked him. She was always guarded, and never severe, in her remarks.

Of all the party, Mark Jeffords presented the most impassable front to the detective. He was always polite, and, at times, coldly sociable, but it was out of the question to pass his guard.

Rube had not forgotten the accusations he overheard Kate Graham make against the secretary, or her allusion to the letter she claimed to have; but if Jeffords had a guilty secret, or feared Perkins, it did not appear in his manner.

Day by day it became more and more evident that he was a man of great ability, strong will and shrewdness, and Rube realized that in a battle of wits with him he would have a worthy foe.

Landgrove's manner did not change. He took a deep interest, or seemed to, in the investigation, and urged Perkins to spare no effort; and he met the latter's gaze frankly and fearlessly at all times. His hospitality knew no flow, and the detective felt that if the shadow could be lifted from the family and their home, it would be a place pleasant enough to pass years of one's life in.

It was at this time that Red Lake approached an event to which most of the young folks looked with eagerness, and Round-up Rube, sitting in his room at the hotel, heard the first real echo of the affair when Sidney Tillotson called upon him.

"Are you going to be busy, to-morrow?" asked the Sacred Comet director.

"Not especially."

"Then I want you."

"For what?"

"The picnic."

The ex-cowboy smiled.

"I'm rather out of the picnic line. As a boy I used to do something at it, and was noticeably skillful at jogging a swing or drinking lemonade, in the East end of our country; but I've run more to grizzly bears and Texas steers, since then."

"Don't get on the road to cynicism at your age," remonstrated Tillotson, smiling. "I'm out of the habit of picnics, myself, but I slander this occasion by calling it by that name. It's a celebration!"

"I've heard of it."

"No doubt. To-morrow, this august town of Red Lake will be five years old, and we don't intend to let the occasion pass without due form, ceremony and jollification. We're going back on the side of the ridge for a day's sport, male and female joining in what I've slanderously called a picnic. We want you along."

"Why?"

"Because every good man is needed."

"I'm afraid I should add nothing to the day, or the event."

"Nevertheless you must and shall go. All the ladies will be there, including—do you know who?"

"No."

"Rachel!"

Rube did not reply at once, and Tillotson laughed aloud in a cheery way.

"I thought that would fetch you. You and I, Marsh, know that it is no simple thing to say, 'Rachel will be there!' We admire her. Possibly, we're rivals!"

He looked at the ex-cowboy in a humorous way, but the latter rallied.

"Speak for yourself, Tillotson!"

"I have, and for you!"

"That Miss Landgrove is an excellent young lady I am ready to admit, for such I think she is, but I am not so ready to confess that—"

"That we are rivals!"

"Are we that?"

"I think so. Not of the kind common to days of chivalry, when men in armor bestrode their horses and tried to run each other through with lances, to decide the matter; nor yet of the stage sort, who fight duels with revolvers. I'm afraid I should make a poor duelist, and you'd be likely to do me up at once. I won't duel with you, thanks! but I shall run my admiration of Miss Landgrove side by side with yours."

"I have not admitted mine."

"And I don't ask you to. You and I both have eyes, and, as a result, you can't help admiring the lady, and I can't help seeing that you do so. But this isn't to the point. Do we go to the celebration?"

"Perhaps I may as well."

"I'll count on you. Have you a horse?"

"No."

"Secure one of the hotel-keeper, then, for we want to go in style. I tell you that we mustn't slight Red Lake's birthday. For the time being I'm going to forget that I'm a grave and austere canal director, and be a boy again."

Tillotson lay back in his chair, smiled, and blew smoke-wreaths from his cigar, and certainly did not act like the "grave and austere" director he claimed to be; but Landgrove was authority for the statement that the younger man had good executive ability.

Even when his visitor was gone, Rube did not feel very much interested in the purposed trip to the ridge. He was not in mood to enter into frivolities, while as for paying attention to Rachel on such an occasion, he did not intend such a step.

"Yet, he decided to go with the party."

Go he did, the next day, when fifty couples left the town and rode up the side of the ridge. The older portion of the community remained to celebrate Red Lake's birthday in graver fashion, for all felt interested in it.

Among those who rode to the ridge were, besides Rube and Tillotson, Rachel, Mazette, and Jeffords. The latter had not gone because he wished to, but Rachel had asked Mazette to go, and the French girl had not cared to go without Mark.

With the opening scenes of the day this story has nothing to do. They rode to the side of the ridge until well up its steep slope, and then camped where they could look down and see Red Lake in the valley, with the gash across the surface of the earth, just north of the town, that marked the presence of the embryonic canal. Then they gave attention to frivolities.

It was after lunch that they unconsciously drew near trouble.

Back of the camp was a cliff, and when some one suggested the idea of climbing it, it became an object of interest and allurements. The result was that there was an epidemic of climbing, and the cliff was soon dotted with objects of various colors, as the celebrators, male and female, toiled up the diagonal fissures.

None of our acquaintances were in the party.

Back in the camp sat the more moderate members, and Tillotson looked toward the cliff thoughtfully.

"I hope none of them will be tempted to wander on after getting up," he observed. "Several hunters have brought stories of a brood of particularly vicious grizzly bears, lately, that seem to have been driven to our section by some circumstance. Probably they've been attacked, and each one is ugly from the lead he carries."

"The young folks should have been warned," observed Jeffords.

"The men were, as a rule, but we didn't want to spoil the day for the girls. Probably they won't wander off, anyhow."

"Grizzly bears are not new to us," reminded Rachel.

"Bears of this kind are. They are big and ugly, and, as I said before, they're so stirred up that they are just spoiling for trouble."

"Let them come; we're all armed; put in a young man of the village."

Tillotson glanced toward a rock against which were leaned a few weapons.

"Only four rifles along," he replied, "and I am not sure any one of us could kill a bear, except Marsh, who comes right from the grizzly ranges."

During this conversation Mazette had been gazing off thoughtfully, and with an air which indicated that she did not hear what was being said, but she suddenly sprang into life with the cry:

"A bear!—a bear!"

She pointed, and the others, looking where she directed, saw the cliff and the climbers, and at the top of the former, with the latter going directly toward him, a huge grizzly which stood silent and impressive on the very top.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SECRET SHOT.

THE sight was too much for Round-up Rube's hunter-instincts, and he sprang to the rock against which leaned the rifles.

The climbers were almost up to the grizzly, and the latter, stirred up, curious, possibly, and certainly angry, was looking down with a savage front.

The rifle was raised to Rube's shoulder deliber-

ately, and he took careful aim. That he could kill the beast with one shot seemed out of the question, but it was a way as easy as any to warn the climbers, and, even if it merely threw the bear into fury, he could not reach the young folks while they were on the face of the cliff.

He pressed the trigger.

The bear threw up his head, but the start seemed so much like mere surprise to unsophisticated Jeffords, that he thought the shot had missed entirely. If he had ever been on the cattle-ranges with Round-up Rube he would not have looked for such a consummation, for the ex-cowboy was not one to miss; but no one was more agreeably surprised at the result than Rube, himself.

After that first start the bear turned as if to leave, but, as he swung his side around, his feet went out from under him; he fell close to the edge of the cliff, struggled for a moment, and then slipped over entirely.

The little party of which the marksman was one watched in silence, but several cries arose from the cliff-climbers; as the huge body went down past them, turning end over end.

A shock followed, and Rube knew that no more lead would be needed.

Whatever of life remained must have been dashed out of the grizzly by the fall.

The ex-cowboy went forward quickly, speaking to reassure the startled climbers, and then bent over the bear. Then he saw how accurate his shot had been; the bullet had entered Bruin's eye, and the doom of the brute was sealed from that moment.

Tillotson shook Rube's hand.

"All hail, Daniel Boone, the modern!" he exclaimed.

"A lucky shot," Marshall quietly commented.

"A shot well aimed, I should say. Reject not your due."

"Anyhow, we are rid of an ugly animal."

"He's a giant, and a fiercer front I never saw. It was a good job to do him up. But, see here, Marsh, do you suppose he is one of the maddened lot which have been driven into our part?"

Rube looked around uneasily.

"If this day's pleasure is to end favorably, I hope not," he answered.

"It would be ugly to have the others appear."

"We are not any too strong with rifles, and have a good many non-combatants to look after. Besides, retreat is not easy, and can't be made swift down the mountain."

The climbers, having lost all desire to reach the top, were hurrying down, and all finally reached the foot of the cliff without mishap.

Then they looked at the dead grizzly with awe and fear.

"I believe he was one of the crazy gang that has been told of in the town," declared one.

"Then the others must be near."

"Let's go home at once."

"What! back out? Not I! We're not going to have our day broken up in this fashion!"

The last declaration came from a headstrong young lady, and she carried the day. There were prudent persons there, especially among the girls, and even Rube gave his voice in warning; but the opposition carried the day. It was decided to remain.

Once more they scattered for amusement, but those who had rifles clung to them—with one exception. He whose weapon the marksman had used with such telling effect handed it over to Marshall, and the latter was not reluctant to carry it.

The reputation of the savage grizzlies that had come from parts unknown was such that he did not feel at ease while the girls were wandering around.

The next alarm was not long in coming. A shriek arose from the furthestmost of the party, and Rube, who happened to have an uninterrupted view, saw that another grizzly was upon the scene. He was lumbering along after the fleeing explorers, but not at a pace which threatened immediate trouble.

The riflemen rallied. The grizzly bore every appearance of being in a mood particularly vicious, and it was clear that he must be disposed of at once.

Unfortunately, one of the men fired with more zeal than prudence or good aim, and, afflicted with a wound which maddened but did not disable him in the least, he kept up the pursuit with growls and snarls of the fiercest kind.

The situation soon turned against him, however. He still followed the girls and their escorts, and this brought him between the riflemen, who were lined on either side.

Rifles cracked along the lane, and other wounds were added to the first.

Marshall was holding his fire with great deliberation, trying to make the shot deadly. His rifle was at his shoulder, and he was about to press the trigger, when the rifle was shaken in his grasp and he lost all chance to shoot.

Something strange had happened, and when he saw the grizzly reel and fall, brought down by the deadly repeating rifles, he turned slowly and looked behind him. There, only a yard distant, was a flat-fronted boulder, and he stooped at its base.

He arose holding in his hand a lump of lead,

irregular to a degree, but bearing unmistakable evidence of having been a bullet.

He glanced toward the quarter from whence it had come, and a frown appeared on his face.

Next he picked up his rifle and examined it. No difficulty was experienced in understanding the situation. There was the slightest possible mark upon the barrel. The bullet had struck the weapon, glanced off, passed Rube's head and flattened itself on the rock.

If it had not been for the interposition of the barrel, the shot would have found lodging-place in the ex-cowboy's body.

It was a keen glance which he sent over the rocks. Had the shot been accidental, or a deliberate attempt to kill him? If it had been the former, it was the work of a man frightened nearly out of his wits.

The course of the grizzly had been through a gully, and, as all the marksmen were on one of the ridges which hemmed it in, they had to point their rifles downward at a sharp incline to aim at the animal. Whoever had fired this stray shot had fired on the level. Was it possible that any man had been so nervous as to pull the muzzle of his rifle up so far?

"No!" Rube decided. "Either the gun went off accidentally, or it was a deliberate attempt on my life!"

Which it was he did not see any room to doubt, and it became clear that he had an enemy in the party. Who was it?

He looked at the crowd collecting around the bear last slain. Nearly all had reached the place, but others were a little back. One of the last, moving down the opposite side, was Mark Jeffords. He carried a rifle, and his gaze seemed fixed upon Rube.

"I wouldn't have thought it of him," the detective murmured, "but, if Kate Graham spoke the truth, the secretary is open to suspicion in some ways, if not as to this little act."

Placing the bullet in his pocket he started down the incline, but had gone only a few rods when he encountered Tillotson.

"Another jewel in our crown," observed the director, lightly.

"And one bear the less."

"Yes. If these fellows were of the gang of wild-bears-on-a-rampage, of whom we've heard, the gang struck a cold wave when they came near Red Lake."

"Did you get in your shot?"

Tillotson wiped the smut from the muzzle of his rifle.

"You bet!" he answered.

"How about our friends on the other ridge?"

"I suppose they did the same."

"Did you see any of them fire?"

"Not that, exactly; but I saw the excitement there, in a vague way."

"Did you notice any man in particular?"

"No."

Tillotson's replies had been careless, but he suddenly looked at Rube, as though he had detected unusual gravity in the latter's voice, and added:

"Why do you ask? Did any of them shirk their duties?"

"Not to my knowledge; in fact, with the repeating-rifles keeping up such a din, it was as though a whole regiment was at it. Somebody, however, will claim credit for the shot. I shall not, for I don't think I touched the brute."

Marshall did not see fit to explain the late attempt upon his life to any one, and his light dismissal of the subject seemed to satisfy Tillotson.

"Well, I had my shot, but if anybody else wants credit, he can have it."

By that time they had reached the group. There was a good deal of careless and jocular talk, but Rube did not take part. He was studying the other men, and trying to decide who had attempted to take his life.

Ignorance of the positions the various marksmen had held was against him. He could not tell who had been on the east, or who on the west side of the ravine—with the exception of Jeffords.

He, certainly, had been on the other side, and suggestively near where the shot had come from.

Notwithstanding this, Mark met Rube's gaze very frankly, and with a manner of fearlessness free from defiance. If he was guilty, he had unbounded nerve. So Marshall stood back and let the others talk, but when the excitement had worn off, and he had studied them all he cared to, he was just as ignorant of who had fired at him.

Was it the result of an accident, after all?

This was possible, but he did not believe it.

Lunch had been brought along, and, as there seemed to be more danger than sport for them, it was agreed to eat and then depart; but when the first had been done, the venturesome ones of the party insisted upon a visit to Dungeon Falls, so called; and all went along finally.

The place was a miniature canyon, down which came a good-sized stream of water. It had many little falls, but only one large one. This was fifty feet wide, and the wall of rock over which the water leaped, to reach its bed twenty-five feet below, was almost as regular as an artificial dam.

Under the falls was a passage, or hole in the rock, which led to a rough, irregular cave. From this the place had its name—Dungeon Falls.

Suitable pieces of resinous pine were obtained and lighted, and then the whole party proceeded to visit the cave.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DEATH-TRAP OF DUNGEON FALLS.

WHEN the sheet of water had been passed at one end it was to be seen that a space of five feet existed between the descending liquid and the rocks, and the light of the pine splinters made it interesting enough for pleasure-seekers.

Something more practical occurred to Rube Marshall. He looked doubtfully at the orifice they were next to explore.

"Suppose the other grizzlies are in there?" he suggested.

The idea met with instant disapproval from those who were bound to proceed, but Jeffords was not so thoughtless.

"I advise against going in," he added, addressing Rachel and Mazette.

Tillotson held his light close to the sand under their feet.

"Where are the footprints?" he asked.

None were to be found, and even cautious Rachel decided that it was safe enough. Tillotson led the way. Rube gave Rachel his arm, and saw Jeffords do the same by Mazette. Then the journey began.

The cave was dark and gloomy. Not one feature saved it from that category. Water dripped from the black rocks; the way was rough and obstructed by boulders; and there were many recesses by the way which were suggestive of danger. To them the roar of the falls now sounded faintly, but the water was still flowing, and flowing over their heads. Tillotson's assertion that the foundation stones were very substantial reassured the timid.

"What do you think of the place, Mr. Marsh?" asked Rachel.

"I think I prefer solid business to picnics," was the dry reply.

"But this is not a picnic; it is the celebration of Red Lake's birthday. Are you sorry you came?"

"I should be if you were not here."

"You are lacking in patriotism."

"I am patriotic enough in my devotion to you."

"And now you flatter!"

"No. Truth is never flattery. You and I are not situated so that I can be a hypocrite."

Rube's conscience smote him as he thought of "Isaac Perkins," and then hurriedly added:

"Remember, I am your champion."

"I don't doubt your loyalty."

"I hope it is not unpleasant to you?"

"I referred solely to business."

Her answer was hurried, but it was not to be taken as a reproof.

"And I referred solely to my loyalty to you!" he answered.

"We drift into words more romantic, even, than our surroundings."

"The latter I hardly see; I am conscious only of the fact that we are together."

Rube was speaking boldly, and he knew it; but the impulse was strong within him to give his tongue free use. There was much of recklessness in it. He realized that he had no right to speak, or to seek to gain her love, while he was working in his double character. Even if Malachi Landgrove proved to be the most honorable of men, Rachel hated "Isaac Perkins," and would not think lightly of the deception. Then, if Landgrove proved guilty—Rube felt a chill not wholly due to Dungeon Cave, and admitted to himself that a detective ought to have nerves of iron.

The explorers had become well separated. Rube and Rachel did not try to keep with the others. There was abundant space under the rocky dome, and they found themselves in a sort of corridor which ended among ragged rocks. A small stream of water filtered through and flowed on to join the larger body outside.

The ex-cowboy held the torch forward and looked at the scene.

"A little of this will go a good ways," he remarked.

"Shall we return?"

"It rests with you."

"We may as well."

They turned, but were not to pass out of the corridor so easily.

As they faced to the front there was a sudden grinding, grating of the rocks ahead, and with a dull shock a huge boulder fell down in their very path. The wet sand was splashed back, but they did not heed its touch.

Their first impression was that the whole dome was caving in, and that they would be crushed; and, when they recovered their calmness, fear of instant death gave place to a threatening fact.

The rock had utterly blocked their way of retreat.

"We are fastened in!" Rachel cried.

"There must be some way out."

Rube spoke hopefully, but he did not fail to

realize the danger of the situation. He utilized his light and surveyed the rock. It was a patent fact that it filled the whole corridor, and not a crevice was to be seen. And the rock must have weighed several tons.

He turned and met Rachel's gaze. Her face was pale, but she exhibited no craven fear.

"It is as I thought," she said quietly.

"We are certainly fastened in, but, remember, we have friends outside."

"Suppose they don't miss us?"

"They must, sooner or later."

"But they will not have any reason to suppose we are in here. They may think we have left the cave and wandered away."

"Yet, they can't have failed to hear the rock fall. Have no fear; they'll get us out."

"Will it be easy to move a rock like that?"

"It can be drilled away!"

"If they learn that we're here!"

Rachel's fears were well founded, and Marshall knew it. Every danger she had mentioned was to be feared. There was a chance that the falling of the rock would not give their friends the clue; that no one would suspect that they had been entombed alive; and, even if it was ascertained, it might not be possible to get them until too late.

Realizing all this, he went as close to the rock as possible, and began to shout at the top of his voice. He had but little hope of success; the very sound seemed to indicate that it did not penetrate beyond the wall of rock.

He only ceased when Rachel called his attention to a new danger.

"Mr. Marsh, the water is accumulating here!"

He turned, and was startled by what he saw. That small stream that percolated through the crevices above, and which had seemed so trivial before, now, became a subject of vast importance. The fallen rock checked its course, and it was forming a pool in the cave-room where they were imprisoned.

If allowed to accumulate, it would drown them in the end.

They were in a veritable death-trap!

Clearly, it must be kept from entering, if such a thing was possible. He hurriedly made an examination, but the result was disheartening. The water entered in a score of places, some at his feet and others above his head, worming its way through the interstices of the various stones in serpentine fashion.

It was impossible to check its course.

He turned to Rachel and told her the truth. It was no time for evasions, for death stared them in the face. How long it would take to fill the place and drown them was uncertain, but it increased in depth on the ground at a rate which was not agreeable.

Rachel heard with more composure than he had dared to hope. Brave she was, and he had known it before, but her heroic calmness now was admirable.

"Can nothing be done?" she asked.

"Can you suggest anything?"

"No."

"Would that I could work, but I have only my knife. That would avail nothing, surely, against the rocks. Under that rock which fell is sand, but, even if I could dig a tunnel there, it would fill with water as soon as made."

"We are helpless, then?"

"We are in the hands of a Power which watches over every human creature," he gravely answered.

"And, I think," she continued, steadily, "we shall soon have to render account to that Power!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

TOLD IN THE SHADOW OF DOOM.

AN hour elapsed.

The water had risen in the prison-room of the cave to a depth of two feet. Rube and Rachel had retreated to the most sloping wall of the death-trap, and taken refuge as far from the reach of the water as possible. He had shouted in the loudest key possible until convinced of the folly of such efforts, and, at Rachel's suggestion, they had sat down to await the end patiently.

Rescue might come, but they did not look forward to it.

Rachel was in a grave mood, but her courage was sublime.

"Our suffering will be short, but it will not be so with one I shall leave behind. It will be a terrible blow to my poor father."

"I can well believe it," Marshall answered.

"He is the noblest of men."

"He is well spoken of," the detective answered, wondering if, in case Landgrove was what his daughter claimed, the attempt to fix crime upon him would be laid up against "Isaac Perkins."

"It is rather hard to die at our age."

"Don't speak of it!" Rube exclaimed. "As far as I am concerned it matters less, for one who goes into wild life as I have must be prepared for all things, but you—oh! Rachel, Providence will—it must open some way of escape!"

"Why more to me than to you?"

"Because your life is more valuable."

"Is there any proof of that?"

"Abundant proof. You would sorely be missed in the world, and all who knew you would grieve. Your kindness, nobility and many charming qualities are known to all and to no one more than to him who, if fate so wills, will end his life with you."

There was no gallantry in the speech. Round-up Rube's courage was not wavering, but he felt a solemnity at that time which graduated his voice, and made it full of gravity, compassion, tenderness and sincerity.

"I am glad you think well of me," she answered, simply.

"Our acquaintance has been short. Ten days ago I came to Red Lake a stranger. Perhaps I am not justified in speaking freely when the time has been so short in days, but, if we are to end our lives here, I am not willing to meet the inevitable in silence. I want to tell you, Rachel, how you and your influence have crept into my life, glorifying it, changing the bent of my hopes, my plans, my thoughts, and making another man of me."

"I hope my influence has been good."

"Can you doubt it?"

"Knowing you as I think I do, I do not feel that I need doubt it."

"I am a man alone in the world. If I die here there will be, I think, no tears shed for me. Kind friends I have, who will regret my untimely taking-off, but that is all. If the supreme moment comes, I shall have thoughts of you only."

Rachel sighed.

"Since I knew you," the ex-cowboy continued, with the same steady solemnity, "I have learned a lesson. There is more in life than existence in the grizzly bear mountains and on the cattle-ranges, and I would gladly give up my wild life—give it up for you!"

His voice faltered for a moment, and she gently replied:

"We may escape, yet."

"Yes; but this is the hour for me to tell my story, lest it remain untold until the world ends for you and me. Rachel, I love you!"

She did not answer, but the hand which he took in his was not withdrawn.

"Since I knew you the sun, the stars and the earth have had a different aspect, and all things seemed tinged by your influence. I lived in a new atmosphere; I had new hopes and plans. From the first your influence was upon me, and it grew day by day; it is upon me now. Rachel, can you say anything in return that will comfort me now?"

"Will it be that if I say I think you honorable and noble, and worthy of all regard?"

"It will be much, but at this hour, I need more. See! The rising water is advancing swiftly; this cavity is filling to a dangerous degree. It is with chastened feelings that I speak, but my love is not less strong. Nay!—it is stronger now than it could be at any other time, and will outlive death. Dare I hope for any return?"

"Yes," Rachel softly replied.

It was answer enough, and he placed his arm around her waist. Her head fell upon his shoulder, and then the only sound in the place was the dipping and gurgling of the incoming water.

That foe was remorseless. Already the cavity was half-filled, and still it filtered through the interstices between the rocks.

Thus Death menaced them in the light of their strength, their youth and their new-found understanding.

Rube Marshall was happy in spite of the danger. If he were to meet death, the love of this woman would be a bulwark against the attack of the King of Terrors.

He considered the advisability of confessing his recent double life, and letting her know that he was Isaac Perkins, but shrunk from the ordeal.

It could do no harm to his detective campaign, if he was to die there; but it would destroy her faith in him at a most supreme moment. He had never intended any harm to her or Malachi Landgrove, and, then, it did not seem a secret so guilty as in the past.

He had tried to do his duty, and nothing more.

No; he would not destroy her faith in him then, and banish his peace of mind forever.

It occurred to him, however, that their situation had brought about a confession of another kind which would never have been made, otherwise. He had resolved not to make any effort to win her love, deeming such a step dishonorable, and the issue of the Amos Smith case promised so darkly that he had expected Rachel to hate him when it was all over.

Thus, the peril of the day was responsible for a great change in their relations.

For a considerable time he meditated gravely upon these points, but, when the water touched his feet, he turned to matters more practical.

He made a careful estimate, and decided that, at the expiration of two hours, the cavity would be filled completely.

Rachel aroused.

"How will the detective case end now?" she asked.

"No one can foresee," Rube answered, uneasily.

"Providence must—it will show all men that my father is innocent!"

"I trust so, Rachel."

"He is too good and noble to harm any one."

"Let us hope the whole world will soon know it."

"Yet, I tremble when I think of Isaac Perkins. Oh! you do not know the powers of evil that are in that man! I believe in law, and doubt not that many detectives are worthy men, but it is not so with Perkins!"

"Are you sure?"

"I am! Every instinct tells me that he is thoroughly evil. From the first I could see that he suspected father. It was father's misfortune that Smith had pronounced against the canal project, and as no one else appeared to have any motive for harming the old man, Perkins has leaped to the conclusion that father must be guilty."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Yes."

"What proof have you?"

"Intuition."

"But, if Perkins is good for anything as a detective, he would not so plainly show an opinion."

"Some men are transparent, and it is so with Perkins. Cupidity, unscrupulousness and malignity show clearly through all his bland manner. I wish I knew his past; I feel sure that he at least has always been a criminal, as a detective or otherwise!"

Unfortunate Rube heard in silence. It was not pleasant, at that critical time, to be thus arraigned.

"There is something strange and ominous in the way he looks at me," pursued Rachel. "I've heard of superstitious persons who believed in the *Evil Eye*, and, if they ever met any one like Perkins, I do not wonder at it. I fear that man; his very presence makes me shudder. He is destined to bring some great misfortune to me!"

Rachel, like Rube, had for the time being forgotten their imminent danger, and spoke as if still in the village.

The detective was silent. Was her last prophecy indeed destined to come true?

"I do not think," the girl resumed, "that his plans of mischief will rest with my father's ruin. There is personal menace to me in the way that he looks at me. He intends me harm! What it is to be I don't know. Possibly he thinks to involve me in my father's downfall, or—there may be more!"

Unhappy Rube could not reply. Never had accusation been more groundless, but he could not refute it. He could not endure to have her hate him, in his true character, in their last hours.

Rachel paused, hesitated, and pressed his hand.

"Let me turn from a picture so gloomy," she added; "let me tell how much I trust you—how noble, good and honorable I know you are!"

It was a strange climax to her late words, but Rube cleared his throat, made an effort to command his voice—it was a miserable failure, however—and vaguely answered:

"It's a relief that it's so."

But deep in his heart was additional gloom, and he was thinking:

"Her opinion is irrevocable; if we are rescued, she will live to hate and despise me. It is better that we die here together!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BOATMAN BETRAYS A SECRET.

"So they was rescued, after all?"

"Yes."

"How'd they get at 'em?"

"Wal, it seems they was jest about ter give up the battle fur good, an' go under, an' was talkin' it over, when Marsh noticed, all of a sudden, that the water, which had been high up whar they set, had gone down nigh ter the bottom o' the den, an' then a sucking noise tol' that it was bein' drained out."

"But how'd it git out?"

"It was Mark Jeffords that first ketched on ter the fact that Marsh an' the girl was buried alive, an' he rallied the whole force ter dig them out."

"An' did it?"

"Yes. Ye see, on the outside, the rock that fell down sloped in at one corner right sharp, an' it wa'n't no great job ter dig the sand away, ef they didn't hev spades. Of course when a hole was made under the rock, the water flowed out."

"An' they got at Marsh an' Rachel?"

"Yes. The hole was made bigger, an' they come out the same way. It couldn't 'a' been very graceful, but, in a time like that, nobody would stand on dignity. They was duly rescued, an' both is at the town, none the worse fur the adventure."

"Wal, 'twas a close call."

"Right! A little while longer, an' they'd been drowned, sure pop!"

The speakers were two laborers on the canal, the seeker for information being Dick Beech. The time was the day following the celebration. All of the party that had gone to the mountain had returned in safety, but the news had gone

abroad that two of the party had been near to death.

While the canal-employees talked, Round-up Rube had been within plain sight of them as they stood near the bank of the canal.

Dick Beech looked at him with a scowl.

"That Marsh is a decent feller, I think, an' he's sartainly put tergeth'er as he should be. Thar's muscle in his arms, partner. I hate ter see him so much with Landgrove's girl."

"Ain't she good enough fur him?"

"No!"

"You'd better tell him so."

"Durn me, ef I ain't a good mind ter. He ought ter know the sort o' cattle he's herdin' with."

Beech kept his gaze fixed upon Rube, and, as he turned the last idea over in his mind, he suddenly reached a decision.

"I'll do it!" he declared, and then he marched toward the ex-cowboy with long steps.

Rube, looking none the worse for his narrow escape of the previous day, was gazing thoughtfully at the canal excavation, when Dick came up in his headlong way.

"Hallo, boss!" the boatman saluted.

"Hallo, Beech! How are you?"

The answer was ready and hearty. Rube had made it a point to get acquainted with Dick, and to win the surly boatman's good will as far as possible; so he now overlooked the difference in their worldly positions, judged from the standpoint of intelligence, and no fault could be found with his manner.

"Ye had a close call yesterday, I hear, boss."

"Yes, I did."

"Like ter got drowned in a pit, eh?"

"Yes."

"Landgrove's gal with ye?"

Rube tried to hide his disgust.

"Miss Landgrove was along," he admitted.

"Say, ef you'd been anyways wise, you'd 'a' let her drowned, by gosh!"

"I judge you don't like her?"

"I don't; I know the brood she belongs ter. Old Mal Landgrove is a rip-roarer in his own conceit, an' he's workin' Red Lake, an' the rest o' the U. S., fur all he's worth; but I kin tell you he's bad! Ef I's Isaac Perkins, I'd look ter Mal. His gal is after the same stock, an' my advice is—look out fur her! You're too well-built a man ter throw yerself away in marriage!"

"Thanks for your warning," Marshall replied, gravely, "but what evidence have you against the parties you name?"

Dick stretched forth his hand toward Landgrove's house with a fierce gesture.

"That's a den o' rattlers, that shebang is; a regular temple of iniquity. Every one on 'em is that sort. I seen Jeffords with ye, yesterday. He's a great pill! Say, I kin tell ye some things about him an' that razzle-dazzle French miss, Mazette!"

"What about them?"

"Be you mum?"

"Decidedly so."

"They're a pair with secrets, an' hers I know right wal. She was once a teacher of French in New York, an' she got a possish in an Upper Toner's house. W'ot did she make out of it, d'ye s'pose? Pard, she jest lifted all the fam'bly diamonds, an' was run inter court on trial. The evidence was weak, an' though everybody knowed she was guilty, the jury disagreed; an' they wouldn't bring her ter trial ag'in, knowin' they couldn't convict her. Jeffords was in court an' seen her on trial—I presume he was thar under arrest, though I didn't learn how that was—an' he knowed her when they met here at Red Lake. What d'ye s'pose?"

"Well?"

"Why, when they met here, he jest took up for her. Wuh!"

"That does look bad for him!"

"I should smile! But I reckon he wa'n't no better than her. He had some secret that bore on Amos Smith, anyhow."

"What could it have been?"

"Dunno."

"Smith couldn't have injured him."

"Don't know as ter that; mebbe Jeffords was only lookin' out fur his job. Anyhow, he was determined that Smith should not go East an' tell a story against the Sacred Comet. I heard him say so."

"When?"

"Boss," answered the boatman, closing one eye knowingly, "when Ike Perkins questioned Jeffords and Mazette, they both swore they wa'n't out o' the house the evenin' afore Smith died. That was a lie!"

"How do you know?"

"Because I'm a duck that keeps his eyes open. I'm sometimes out fur a walk o' evenin's; I was out that night!"

Dick paused, looked uneasy, and added:

"Say, Marsh, you won't tell Ike Perkins this?"

"Certainly not."

"Wal, I was in the garding that eve, an' I seen Jeff an' Mazette there!"

"Are you sure?"

"Sure! Why, I watched 'em a long time, an' heard 'em talk. They spoke about Mazette havin' been on trial in New York, though I

knowed that afore; an' they spoke how determined Jeff was not ter let old Amos go home with his yarn. What d'ye s'pose happened them?"

"I don't know."

"I do; old Smithy ketched them. Whew! how the fur flew then! They had a red-hot row, and the old gent got hisself disliked. He swore he'd make it public that Mazette was next the same to a convict—he knowed her secret, ye see—an' Jeff took him in hand an' waltzed him around."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Shook him up."

"They had a fight, did they?"

"Hardly that, fur Smithy was too old to put up his dukes and do much hurt, but Jeff shook him as he would a rat, and gave the old gent a great settin' up."

"How did it end?"

"Don't know. I seen somethin' else I wanted ter watch, an' I left 'em."

"Do you suppose Jeffords injured the old man?"

Dick pulled at his faint, black mustache several times before answering.

"I can't say," he finally responded. "It ain't ever been my theory that Jeff killed Smithy, though it might 'a' been so. But, say, my time's up; work is about ter begin, an' I must be with the crowd. What I wanted, Marsh, was ter say you'll do wal ter keep shy o' the gang over in that house; they're bad medicine. I hate ter see a man as wal built as you be, taken in. So-long!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE GIRL RIDER OF THE NIGHT.

DICK BEECH waved his hand and walked back to rejoin the other laborers. He left Round-up Rube in a puzzled mood.

Had the boatman been telling the truth or not?

Both Jeffords and Mazette had declared that they were not in the garden the eventful evening when Amos Smith was killed, but here was a witness who swore to having seen them there. If he told the truth, it made it bad for them. If he told the truth! There was the stumbling-block. Rube had seen enough of the redoubtable boatman to be sure that his word was not to be taken even under oath, but, in this case, he felt that the truth had been spoken.

In memory he went back to the time when Mazette had stood before him—before "Isaac Perkins"—in Landgrove's house, to be questioned. He remembered her agitation; her reluctance to look him in the face; her manner, so strange from beginning to end.

All this was fresh in his mind. He had realized, even then, how much it might mean, but, with his usual prudence, had refrained from asking any pointed questions, or from making comments to others.

At that time he had thought that, building upon what he could see, he would soon have the clew to the Smith mystery, but every day had served to perplex him more and more, and never had the case seemed so puzzling, or he to be so far from the solution of the mystery, as at the present time.

The abundance of evidence was worse than no evidence.

First of all, Malachi Landgrove was worthy of notice. He certainly had strong reason for wishing that Smith might never return East, and the ugly testimony of the knife he had purchased of the strolling juggler had not been explained away. In an indirect manner hapless Rachel had borne testimony to the fact that the knife was like that found in Smith's room.

Next, Jeffords had desired that Smith should not go East with his unfavorable report, though the secretary's reason was a mystery. Also, Jeffords had falsely asserted that he was not in the garden, whereas, he was there; had met Smith and quarreled with him. The secretary was hiding some secret which he dared not tell.

Then came Dick Beech himself; a dangerous, malevolent fellow, who was regarded by Sally Hooks, a woman who had an aunt's love for him, as the real murderer. And to her Dick had not denied the accusation, but, rather, had assumed the burden with an air of bravado.

Which of the trio was guilty?

Hemmed in by contradictory evidence, Rube knew that he could give apparent proof against any one sufficient to make a grand jury regard the charge with gravity, but, himself, he was far from satisfied.

"I have only to wait, however. With so many lives in my hands, I am bound to land the fish yet. In some unguarded moment he will betray himself. Patience! The world was not made in a day, and I can't hope to do this job on the jump. The end is certain, however!"

He experienced fresh pangs of mind as he considered what it would be if Malachi Landgrove was the "fish" landed.

Matters had gone from bad to worse, of late.

In an unguarded moment, menaced by death at the cave of Dungeon Falls, he had confessed his love to Rachel. Once he had vowed not to do this, and not to seek her love, until he knew that all would be well.

Fate had been against him. The story had

been told in the shadows of coming doom, as it seemed; and now, surely, if Rachel learned the truth, she would despise him with a strength before which her loathing of Isaac Perkins would be as nothing.

"Heaven help her!" he thought. "She walks in a path beset with pitfalls, and I, who should be her protector, have laid them for her feet."

That afternoon, when mild-mannered Isaac Perkins reappeared at Landgrove's, he was his old self in every way, and no sign of low spirits or perturbation was to be seen. He expressed regret that he had not been present at the celebration, accounted for his absence plausibly, and fell into Perkins's old method of life easily.

Night came again, and Isaac retired to his room. He extinguished the light and lay down on the bed, but did not undress. At the end of an hour and half he arose.

"She was restless and uneasy, and in the mood of one who has an important step to take," he muttered. "It may mean nothing, and it may mean a good deal."

He opened the door and passed out into the hall. Darkness prevailed there, and no sign indicated that any one else was astir.

He ascended to the second floor and paused before the door of Mazette's room. A faint band of light showed under the door.

For a moment he paused, reluctant to take the next step, but he remembered that he was a detective and answered the imperative call of duty. He placed a chair carefully before the door, stepped up into it, and thus brought his face on a level with the transom.

This was curtained, but not fastened, and it was easy to push it a little ajar. He did so, and looked into the room.

Mazette was there, and alone. She sat at a table, and was writing rapidly. Her manner impressed Rube at once; her face was flushed, her eyes sparkled unnaturally, as though with nervous excitement, and she worked with feverish haste.

The detective was soon satisfied. He replaced the chair and returned to his room.

"Something is afoot. What?"

He speculated upon this question without gaining any light, but waited patiently by the door. Half an hour passed, and then he heard the faint rustling of female apparel. When he thought the unknown had passed his door, he opened it slightly and looked out. Some one attired for the outer air was just vanishing, and, though he could not tell positively who it was, he was not at a loss for an opinion.

Quietly he opened the window and passed out.

Mazette was about to leave the house, unless he erred greatly, and he was resolved to shadow her.

He had no great difficulty in getting sight of her again, but her movements then surprised him. She went at once to Landgrove's stable, and began to saddle and bridle a horse.

Rube was perplexed. He could not understand the object of this midnight ride, but of one thing he was certain: she would not go alone on the trail.

She showed perfect familiarity with the work in hand, and soon had the horse equipped. She led it from the stable, mounted and rode away.

Clearly, she was unconscious that she was being watched.

The ex-cowboy then showed his own dexterity. Throwing a bridle over his arm, he untied one of the remaining horses, led him out of the stable, mounted and rode away, bridling the animal as he went. He followed Mazette.

He was well aware that the task would not be easy if she had any reason to expect pursuit, and he might fail utterly; but, as seemed probable, if she did not look for any one to follow, important developments might come.

He was at a loss to understand her movements. He vaguely remembered having heard it said that Rachel had given her a horse, so it was possible that she was not appropriating any other person's property. In any case, Marshall believed her above petty theft.

The night was in the pursuer's favor, being dark enough so that he could keep somewhat near her, and the odds were all on his side. Long experience fitted him for the labor, while it was just the reverse with Mazette.

She rode through the town and took the trail to Duck-bill Drift, riding at a brisk trot.

All this was puzzling. Mazette had never given any indication of unusual courage, and, of late, she had been nervous to an extreme. What motive could prompt her to dare the dangers of the mountain trail? It was a wild road, and far from safe.

"Some desperate purpose must urge her on," Rube thought. "Braver women than she would not dare make the journey even with an escort; Mazette was mad to go alone!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN EVIL TWAIN OF THE TRAIL.

THE shadows of the pass fell darkly upon Mazette. The Duck-bill Drift trail was one of wild and irregular peculiarities. The camp from which it took its name lay in the same val-

ley with Red Lake, but it was at the extreme northwest corner. The Drift was the wildest of the nest of camps the Sacred Comet was designed to help. Hemmed in by rocks, ridges and hills, it sent its features all along the western slope, and it was there that the trail ran.

A traveler rose and fell alternately as he conformed to the caprice of the ground, but whether in valley or on ridge, forest, rock and gulch were always his neighbors. The only escape from the tangle was to reach one of the termini of the trail.

In this wild region tragedies had been enacted. There roved the fierce grizzly; there skulked the even more lawless man who, dreading the notice of honest people, lived in the wilds and subsisted as he could.

Mazette had known this, yet she had braved the danger.

Round-up Rube kept as near her as he dared. After the first half-mile she never looked around, but, maintaining a trot when the way was favorable, went on with a steadiness born of a fixed purpose.

The detective expected something to occur, and something did occur. Suddenly he perceived that the girl no longer rode alone. He had kept near enough to distinguish her at all times, and where there had been but one dark object, there were now three.

She had companions on the trail!

Rube grew curious. Who were the other riders? All were in motion, moving along the trail as before, but that did not indicate the feeling that existed among them. Perhaps the others were men—for men they seemed to be—whom she had met by appointment, but he remembered the stories told of Duck-bill Drift trail, and was by no means satisfied.

He increased his speed and rode dangerously near for one who would avoid discovery. The voices of the riders became audible—all except Mazette's. Her companions were laughing and talking loudly, and one thing became apparent.

If Mazette had sought their company willingly, her apparent refinement was a sham.

The men stood branded as roughs. Their boisterous manner, coarse laughter and free-and-easy conduct was that of men lawless and dangerous. Whatever Mazette had sought, she had found company which might well awaken her deepest fears.

Still the trio rode on. At times there was evidence that the girl endeavored to quicken her speed, as if to have an unpleasant journey soon over, but the strangers kept by her side.

Their boisterousness increased, and one of them fell to singing. He had a voice as devoid of music as the proverbial saw, and it would have harrowed up the feelings of an expert to a painful degree, but it was not less offensive than the words of the songs with which he affronted the ears of nature.

Rube rode even closer. He was well-armed, and he believed that Mazette would yet need his aid.

The trio paused where a canyon crossed the trail, and, as the pursuer did the same, their words drifted to him plainly.

"I tell you that is the road!" Mazette declared, pointing toward the north.

"An' I say that is the road!" answered one of the men, pointing up the canyon.

"You are mistaken."

"I, mistook! Say, Sim Soden, did ye ever hear the like o' that? I, mistook! an' me bein' the wild war-hoss o' the Rockies! Why, I kerry a compass in my hat, and my nose is the needle. You'll observe my nose now pints up the canyon, an' that's proof it's north!"

The second rough laughed loudly.

"Ef thar's a logical critter out, it's Ham Flint!" he declared.

"I've often been on this trail—"

Mazette began to speak in a tremulous voice, but Flint broke in rudely:

"So've I. I live hyar, d'ye mind! an' I know every rock as a farmer does his chicks. Wah! wah! It's a cold eve when old Ham gits lost in these hills!"

"You can go there, if you wish," Mazette said.

"We kin?"

"Yes, sir."

"Bet yer life, we kin!"

"But I am going the other way."

"You be?"

"Yes, sir."

"Bet yer life, yer ain't!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that we can't spare ye, dearie!"

"Sir?"

"Oh! come, now, don't git on yer dignity. Hyar be we, Sim Soden an' me, two lone lopers o' the lonely land o' loneliness, an' sorer broods in our heart like a duck on her eggs. We hev met a fairy on the trail, an' it wrenches our aforesaid hearts right smart tough ter think o' castin' ourselves adrift. Abide with us while we travel, an' we do vow by the pale moon that is shinin' on Chiny that we'll take you saft an' sound ter Duck-bill Drift."

The standing of the roughs was no longer to be questioned, and the fear they awakened in Mazette's mind was very perceptible in her voice.

"I am in haste, sir, and I beg that you will not detain me."

"This hyar is the shortest way."

"The other way satisfies me."

"An' you reject our advice?"

"I have no time for experiments, and feel obliged to take the way known to me."

"All right!"

Mazette's manner clearly indicated expectation that they still would oppose her, but Flint's acquiescence was both ready and good-humored. It was surprising, too, but Rube Marshall noticed one thing which may have escaped the girl's notice.

Sim Soden had dismounted, gone to the off-side of Mazette's horse and lifted one of its feet.

Ordinarily, this might have passed as a very matter-of-fact act, but Rube did not so regard it; he decided that the horse's foot had been tampered with, and was not at a loss to surmise what would soon follow.

Finding that she was not opposed in any way, Mazette resumed her journey. Soden and Flint kept her company, and, if possible, their manner was more boisterous than before. They sung at the top of their hurricane-like voices songs which put every law of harmony to defiance, and it was not hard to comprehend Mazette's feelings.

Rube watched her horse, and soon perceived that the animal limped. The lameness came on suddenly, and increased rapidly. It became torture for him to step, and, at last, he declined to respond to his mistress's urging and came to a full halt.

Flint dismounted and made an examination, with the result that he loudly declared that, though the particular trouble was not visible to the eye, it was out of question for the animal to go on.

"The only way is fur us ter camp," he added.

"I can't do that!" Mazette declared.

"Why not?"

"I must go on to Duck-bill Drift."

"But yer hoss can't go."

"Then I'll walk!"

"Se yere," Soden put in, "we gents expects another gent along this way, an' ef we camp until he comes, ye kin then hev his quidruped."

"I will not trouble you; I can walk."

"Tell ye what," said Flint, seeking for another pretext, "I b'lieve I kin git at the secret o' the trouble ef I hev a light. You jest dismount, an' we'll shake up a pine splinter, an' hev a blaze. Thar may be a pebble in his foot, an' a light will enable me fur ter find it."

Rube knew there was no sincerity in the proposal, but Mazette, at a loss what to do, felt compelled to agree. She must leave the saddle, anyhow, since the horse could not go on, and as the men had not yet given positive evidence of evil intentions, it would hardly do to reject the offer of assistance.

She dismounted, the horses were grouped at one side, and Soden and Flint made a show of carrying out their plan.

The detective thought it time to interfere. Whatever might be Mazette's object in taking the night ride, he would have no chance to learn it now. They might delay, but, clearly, it was the intention of the two ruffians to stop her, then and there. They were merely amusing themselves with her fears.

Rube rode boldly forward.

Mazette saw him first, as an exclamation of relief proved, but whether she had detected that he was "Isaac Perkins" was not certain. Then Soden and Flint made a similar discovery, and suspended work to look.

"Good-evening, gentlemen," the pretended old man said, blandly.

Their looks had been hostile, but, even in the night, they could see the whiteness of his false beard, and the fact tended to reassure them. It did not seem that one of his age could balk them.

"Hillo, old man!" Soden replied.

"Resting by the way?"

"We ain't doin' nothin' else."

"Can I join you?"

"Want ter camp?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, squat!"

Soden gave the invitation in an off-hand way, and acted as though he did not think it necessary to give a thought to the aged traveler; but he prudently kept between him and Flint, who was at the horse's foot.

"Allow me to see the animal," Perkins requested. "Being something of a doctor, I may discover the trouble."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE STRANGE EXPLOITS OF AN AGED MAN.

THE ex-cowboy advanced, but Soden blocked the path.

"No yer don't!" the ruffian exclaimed.

"What do you mean?"

"We don't want no hoss-doctors."

"I charge nothing for my services."

"You'd kill the hoss."

"If I do, I'll pay for it."

"I tell yer, critter, stand back! We won't hev yer nosin' around that animyle's foot. Ain't that so, Ham Flint?"

"You bet!"

"The horse is mine," suddenly spoke Mazette, "and I desire this man to examine its foot."

"Hoity-toity!" retorted Soden. "Who's boss hyar, anyhow? Be I myself, or ben't I?"

And he squared himself away in a preposterous attitude.

"You talk like a man of sense, don't you?" Rube ironically returned. "I should say that you had trod the drunkard's path, if it did not cost something to drink, and money you certainly haven't got."

"See hyer, old man, you muzzle yer mouth, or I'll chuck ye over some precipice, an' let the buzzards p'int up their beaks on yer shin-bones!" Soden beligerently exclaimed.

"Delicately as you express it, it is clear that you do not care to employ me as a doctor," Rube replied, imperturbably, and then he turned to Mazette.

"Daughter, you travel late," he added.

She looked at him wonderingly. Before then she had discovered who he was, and was in a state of trepidation and uncertainty. She had feared and disliked him, but he came in a time when she was in sore need of help. Whether he was able to give it she did not know, but the poorest of helpers is not to be despised in a time when the storm-clouds of fate lower above the afflicted.

"Yes," she answered, mechanically.

"Whither do you go?"

"To Duck-bill Drift."

"Why?"

"I have left Red Lake."

"For how long?"

"Forever—never to return!"

"Indeed! Why is that so?"

Mazette hesitated. In her fear and mental distress she had thrown off the caution and reserve manifested at Red Lake. For the time being she had forgotten that the self-styled Isaac Perkins was a man whose business it was to worm secrets out of others, and had spoken frankly. Her recklessness now became evident, and she could not find words to answer.

The detective waited, and then slowly added:

"You take a singular time to travel."

"What difference does it make?" she answered, nervously.

"Considering the company into which you have fallen, I should say it made some difference."

Sim Soden advanced. What had been said had not attracted his attention at first, but, the moment he saw the new-comer in conversation with Mazette, he was on the alert. He looked hard at both, but the darkness prevented him from reading the face of either.

"The boss is played out," he announced, "an' we'll hev ter stay hyar."

"The young lady can have my horse," remarked Perkins.

"No, she can't!"

"No?"

"That's what I said."

"What have you to do with it?"

"The gal is under our care, an' you need not put in one word about it, old gent. See?"

"It rests with her to say, not with you. If she prefers your company, I will mount and ride on; but if she chooses me, she shall have my help."

"Your help! What can you do, fossil?" sneered Soden.

"We will see. Young lady, make your choice!"

"I will go with you," answered Mazette, but the reply was tinged with the doubt that was in her mind; she thought it wild to suppose that aged Mr. Perkins could deal with the ruffians, and was reluctant to urge him on to destruction.

"We'll see about that!" declared Ham Flint, coming to the front. "I say that your meddlin' ain't wanted here, an' won't be allowed. The gal stays with us, an' you monkey with the job at yer peril. You see the trail, yender?"

"I see."

"That's the road ter Duck-bill Drift. Git!"

"Eh?"

"Straddle yer hoss, an' git out!"

"Not at your bidding!" retorted Rube, in a voice sharper than that which marked Isaac Perkins's utterance, usually.

"Skip, or I'll hammer ye!"

Ham advanced with upheld fists, while Sim Soden chuckled gleefully.

"Go in, Flinty! Hop on ter him, my bully boy! Do him up, my pugilistic pard!"

"Right, I will! I'm a wild war-hoss o' the Rockies! I'm a cannon ball with legs! I'm an alligator with seventeen teeth on ev'ry jaw! I'm a war-whoop taken out o' hock an' let loose! I'm a terrific combination o' rattlesnake's jabber an' ghost-thatsnaps-spinal-columns-all-ter-smash! Wah!"

"You are a preposterous braggart and ruffian, and, I presume, a coward, too!" Rube retorted.

The insinuation was too much for Ham, and he struck out fiercely, intending to crush the gray-bearded meddler with his huge fist. The attempt was a failure, for the blow was warded off neatly, as were the two that followed.

This was too much for the fellow's composure. He perceived that Perkins had considerable science, but the fact that a man so old, judging

by appearances, could for a moment stand before him, stung the fellow to a fury.

He rushed forward, resolved to beat his opponent down, but, strangely enough, the old man did not give way. He stood his ground, and gave blow for blow zealously.

Sim Soden was in ecstasies. If Ham had won easily it would not have been worth mentioning, but as the aged stranger stood up so well, there was real fun in it—so Sim thought. Now and then he heard the sound of a blow that surely told, and he did not doubt that it was given by his partner.

"Brayool brayool!" he shouted. "Oh! you're a good 'un, Hammy! Wade in, but don't massacre him too quick; hev some fun with him! Tumble up, Flinty! Brush off the peak of his nose! Comb his bangs out—Eh? Hello!"

He stopped short. Ham Flint lay sprawling on the ground, while aged Mr. Perkins stood cool and unconcerned. The fallen ruffian groaned feebly.

"What yer playin' 'possum fur?" cried Sim.

"Go in, my bully wild-hoss, an' pulverize him!"

"Tackle him, Sim; tackle him!" moaned the fallen man. "He's a demon; he's fit me blind!"

A realization of the truth slowly dawned upon Soden's clumsy mind, and he became filled with an earnest desire to do what his partner had failed so ingloriously to accomplish. He bounded forward, roaring like a wild bull.

"Look out fur me; I'm a-comin'!" he announced, anxious to have his victim realize the danger before he was crushed.

He came, but not long did he stay. Rube's clinched hand shot out to meet him, and the ruffian fell with a shock which jarred him through and through. For a moment he sprawled by his companion, and then sat up and clawed at his eyes in an absurd way.

"The smoke is thick, an' I can't see right smart," he admitted, quaveringly.

"Perhaps you can see that you're not cut out for a pugilist," Rube suggested, coolly.

"The rock that fell on my head did it. I'm shook up; I'm mightily shook up. Them blue flames that run afore my peepers is confusin'!"

"Knocked out in one round," lamented Ham Flint.

The ex-cowboy turned to Rachel, though still keeping a wary eye upon the vanquished men.

"We will ride on, Miss Duane, and I'll see you safe to your journey's end," he announced. "Which way do we go?"

Mazette looked toward Duck-bill Drift; then toward Red Lake, and sighed.

"I don't know," she faintly returned.

"It rests with you."

She did not answer, but the conflict in her mind was evident. She had started on her journey with a heart full of sorrow, and the recent events had added to the pain of leaving the town where she had found such good friends. Must she exile herself from all she knew and loved?

The battle was a hard one.

Marshall went to her horse and examined its foot. As he had suspected, it had been tampered with; a pointed stone had been introduced so deftly under the shoe, and bound in, that it was pressing into the most tender part of the foot. He pried the stone out with his knife, and felt that the animal was fit for travel at any time.

It was necessary to go without delay.

The two ruffians were still upon the ground, and he knew something about the force of the blows he had given them; but it was clear that natural cowardice entered a good deal into their quiet mood, also.

They might rally at any moment, and resort to weapons more deadly than fists. Once more he addressed Mazette.

"Be so kind as to mount, at once!"

She started, nervously, advanced, and he helped her into the saddle. Then he followed her example, and all was ready for the start. He looked at her with more than ordinary interest.

"Which way do we go?" he asked.

CHAPTER XXIX.

RUBE IS ASKED TO PROMISE.

Mazette was silent; the battle in her mind still continued. She was midway between Red Lake and Duck-bill Drift. Which way was she to go? Should her flight be continued, and all connection severed with her best friends? Temptation assailed her and said, "Go back to Red Lake!" But she had not forgotten the causes which led to her flight, and she resisted the impulse strongly.

Round-up Rube waited with more patience than he would have felt ordinarily, when he knew that two ruffians were before him who were liable to rouse to dangerous action at any moment.

Mazette had never been more of a puzzle than at that moment.

Why had she left Red Lake?

He was positive that some urgent demand had sent her, but her going had been dramatic in the extreme. A midnight flight; a secret flight; a flight from a house filled with mystery, and overhung by the shadow of crime, tragedy and dread.

Gladly would the detective have penetrated

her mind then, but he had a presentiment that his every effort would fail. Gentle as Mazette was by nature, she was, also, of that order of women who are as loyal and enduring as the globe daily trodden by man.

How her struggle would have ended had she been left to decide alone can never be known. A new sound suddenly fell upon the ears of all there; the rapid, heavy beating of a horse's feet; the rattling of hoofs under a horse ridden at a gallop. The noise was magnified by the silence of night and the echoes of the rock-ribbed hills until it was like the sound of a distant drum, but the rider came nearer and nearer with each bound of the spirited animal he bestrode.

Every one watched for his coming.

There was a trace of eagerness in the way Mazette turned toward the south, as Rube plainly saw; it was as if she had a hope, and was anxious for its verification. Marshall, himself, was impassive, while Soden and Flint still squatted on the ground, toad-like, and gazed in stupid wonder.

The rider came up with a rush. He shot out of the darkness, as it were, like a meteor in black; he was beside them; he reined in his horse and gazed in eagerness equal to the girl's.

"Mazette!" he then exclaimed, joyfully.

Rube smiled; the new-comer was Mark Jeffords.

Mazette murmured something inaudible to Rube.

"What are you doing here?" the secretary demanded.

"I am waiting—I was going—"

Mazette came to a full halt.

"These men—who are they?" Jeffords demanded.

"Speaking for myself," returned he of the gray beard, "I will say that my name is Isaac Perkins."

"Perkins!"

There was disgust and fear in Jeffords's forcible repetition of the name, and he then turned again to the girl.

"You, here, with him!" he added, with marked meaning.

"He has been very kind to me; he has saved me from great danger," she explained, hurriedly, and with manifest desire to save him from committing any indiscretion. "Yonder men—they had stopped me, and I was in great fear when he appeared and chastised them."

"Who are they?"

"We're meek an' humble wanderers in the wale o' solemnitude an' peace," faintly observed Ham Flint—he who, only a short time before, had been boisterously asserting that he was "a wild war-horse of the Rockies," "an alligator with seventeen teeth on every jaw," and other things even more sanguinary.

"They are lawless tramps and toughs," tersely amended Isaac Perkins. "Judicious use of Nature's weapons has reduced them to their present state, but you want to watch out that they don't shoot you in the back."

"Oh! we ain't that sort o' gentlemen!" cried Sim Soden. "We are peaceable lecturers on botany—"

"Silence, ruffian!" Rube commanded.

Jeffords rode to the detective's side.

"Mr. Perkins, I think I understand," he said, "and I thank you most heartily. You have done a noble work. Here is my hand, sir!"

It was a hearty pressure which the secretary gave, and Rube did not shrink from the proof of gratitude. Jeffords then looked first at Mazette and then back to the detective.

"Will you excuse me, sir," he asked, "if I speak with Miss Duane privately?"

"Certainly."

Rube made the reply carelessly. He would have been glad to hear what was said, but knew that he could not accomplish his object by making the request. Since, in case of obstinacy on his part, they could make it a losing game to him by keeping silent, it was as well to acquiesce gracefully.

Jeffords rode to Mazette's side, and a long conversation followed.

Marshall preserved his contented, careless air, but did not fail to listen sharply. His hearing was acute, and occasional words became audible to him.

He did not learn why the girl had fled from Landgrove's, but did learn that Mark was urging her to return. This idea she combated, but with such evidence of mental distress that her own wishes were not hard to understand.

Nevertheless, she opposed the plan, and, as Rube understood, for Mark's sake. If she returned, she would put the latter in jeopardy.

All this was puzzling, and it brought up the secret which hemmed in the two. Ever since Amos Smith's death they had been struggling along in darkness, doubt and danger; but what their troubles had to do with Smith's tragic end, if anything, was a problem.

Jeffords won, as Rube expected he would, and Mazette yielded the point. Her lover returned to the detective.

"Miss Duane and I are about to return to Red Lake," he announced. "Do you keep us company?"

"My road runs that way."

"Then we shall be glad to have you along."

"Thanks. I'll go."

"What about these ruffians?"

"Oh! oh!" cried Ham Flint, piteously, "don't speak so rude! We're meek an' tender-hearted sojourners in the wale o' hummony an' tenderness, an' our hearts is free from guile. We're lambs gambolin' on the greensward! We're turkle-doves roostin' on a sunflower limb. We're cuckoos o' the valley o' Eden, an' rags is our sign o' honesty!"

"You are stupid knaves, who will some day run your bull-necks into halters!" retorted Marshall. "For my own part, I am inclined to think you've been punished enough, but let up on your allegations of honor and peaceableness. Do you think we are fools enough to believe you? If you do, you'll have to be 'thrashed' again!"

His sharp, incisive speech carried conviction to the ruffians' minds, and they relapsed into silence as diplomatic as it was profound.

The trio of riders went their way. Rube made an excuse of watching Sim and Ham, to get at the rear, so Mark and Mazette led the way, side by side. The return over the lonesome trail was begun, but under circumstances vastly different to Mazette from those under which she had ridden toward Duck-bill Drift.

The ex-cowboy left them to themselves, and saw that they were happy in spite of the threatening clouds of the future. To them, it was much to be together.

Rube meditated on the situation as he rode after them. Clearly, Jeffords had discovered the girl's flight, probably by accident, and had made a strong and successful effort to stop it.

But the old position of affairs would never be resumed; Mazette's last step had given Detective Perkins new points, and, as they had feared him before, they must fear him more than ever henceforth.

There would be no real happiness for them until the mysteries of the Landgrove house were laid open to the gaze. After that—Well, it was not easy to see how they would be situated then.

Mazette's horse did not show lameness enough to trouble him seriously, and the return to Red Lake was one of fair speed. All the while Perkins kept at the rear, but, when they neared the town, the secretary fell back and joined him. There was something in Mark's manner that puzzled Rube; he seemed to have undergone a change, and to be more confident and far lighter of heart than had been the case since the detective first met him.

"Mr. Perkins," he began, freely, "may we ask a favor of you?"

"Certainly."

"It is that you will tell no one about the events of this night."

"What is the object of secrecy?"

"Miss Duane took a certain step of which she has since repented. She left Malachi Landgrove's house without informing any one of her intentions, but second thought having induced her to return, she wishes the fact to remain unknown to every one. You and I can alone betray her. I shall not; I hope you will not."

"Is there any reason," the detective pointedly asked, "why I should be interested in the motive of her flight?"

"There is not; I give you my word of honor to that effect."

Very frankly spoke Jeffords, and Rube could see no trace of the doubt and fear which had so weighed upon him before.

"There is a mystery that overshadows Landgrove's."

"You refer to Amos Smith's death," readily returned the secretary, showing no reserve.

"I do. If I promise to keep silent, do I place any impediment in the way of my investigation of that case?"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE BOATMAN DEMANDS HUSH-MONEY.

It was a plain question, but Jeffords answered without hesitation:

"You place no such impediment, sir."

"And," pursued Rube, "this midnight flight was not brought about by the Smith case?"

"Certainly not."

"Have you, Mr. Jeffords, told me all you know about the aforesaid case?"

"Have I? Decidedly so. Do you doubt it?"

"I did not say so."

"Your words implied it."

"Yet, you have nothing to tell?"

"I know nothing about the murder, Mr. Perkins."

"And there is nothing else you wish to speak of?"

Jeffords looked sharply at the detective.

"What are you driving at, Perkins?"

"Information!"

"I told all that I knew at the first examination."

"Very well; we will let the matter rest. As to the promise you have requested of me, I agree not to refer to Miss Duane's night-ride for any trivial reason."

Rube fully expected that the promise would

be unsatisfactory, couched as it was, but Jeffords surprised him by answering heartily:

"That is all we desire, sir, and we thank you cordially for your kindness."

Then he rode on and rejoined Mazette.

"Stranger!" thought the detective. "What change has come over the two? Just at the moment when one would suppose they would regard their situation as additionally critical, and when I have become knowing to a singular step taken by the girl, they become light-hearted. What has happened to change the affair so greatly? Can they have found comfort in their own conversation? It seems out of the question, yet, what else can have caused it?"

He was not enlightened.

The journey to Landgrove's was finished, and the two men stabled their horses as amicably and stoically as if the occasion was of but ordinary import; then Mark left the detective to enter the house with Mazette.

Rube was soon in his room, but he found himself more at loss than ever. He lay down and meditated on the fresh mystery, but fell asleep with it unsolved.

In the morning the perplexity was continued. During the ten days he had been in the house Mazette had uniformly refrained from speaking to him except when necessary; had avoided his gaze, shrunk from him and been downcast; but on this morning she greeted him in a friendly, grateful way, looked him frankly in the face, and showed no sign of the old aversion.

The change in Jeffords's manner was nearly as pronounced; his coldness had vanished, and he talked cordially to the self-styled Perkins.

The latter looked for a corresponding miracle in the case of Rachel, but found none. Dignified and ladylike she was, as was natural to her, but in many little ways she betrayed the fact that she still regarded Perkins with aversion and loathing.

After breakfast the detective, still in the role of the aged detective, called upon Sheriff Ball, and passed an hour there. Next he wandered over near the canal, and sat watching the men work. When he tired of this, he sauntered toward the ridge which Malachi Landgrove intended to tunnel—when he obtained money enough.

While he was moving through the sparse timber he saw something which caused him to take shelter in a thicket, anxious not to be seen.

Rachel was approaching, accompanied by Sidney Tillotson.

The sight gave Rube a pang of jealousy, for the canal director had frankly avowed that he was a suitor for her hand, and even the understanding arrived at in the cave under Dungeon Falls did not explain why she walked with Tillotson. A moment later the ex-cowboy smiled at his doubts of Rachel, but he did not leave the covert.

They, however, paused near at hand—so near that Rube could overhear their words.

"I'll go over and help on the Sacred Comet," Tillotson remarked. "I shall be more appreciated there, perhaps."

"I hope you are not offended?" Rachel replied.

"How can I be? True, you refused to marry me, but it was as much your affair as mine. Where there are two partners in business, each a half-owner, each has a vote. Certainly, when matrimony is spoken of between you and me, you have as much to say as I. We're not equal partners, though—because you have refused to enter into partnership!"

And Tillotson smiled at his own humorous fancy.

"I'm glad you don't blame me."

"Possibly you may not be glad when I say I shall not give up until you're married to Rube Marsh."

"Mr. Tillotson!"

"Pardon me again: I mean no harm. Maybe I am too frank, but I have for some time recognized the fact that Marsh and I were rivals. Don't be frightened, Rachel!" and Tillotson laughed cheerily. "He and I shall not quarrel. If he wins, I'll be at the wedding with a claw-hammer coat on my back and a congratulatory smile on my face. Now, that don't sound just right, does it? Too much levity, I confess; but you know my way. That's all for now, but don't think I blame you for refusing me. We'll be friends, just the same!"

Round-up Rube found much consolation in this dialogue. If Tillotson had been an old friend instead of a new acquaintance he would not have been willing to yield him any part of Rachel's love, and it was a relief to know she had refused his offer of marriage.

Tillotson shook her hand and walked off. She remained looking after him. Rube felt like joining her, but could not very well do so in his Perkins guise. Some one else, however, did join her.

While he had been in covert the detective had noticed a man with a short, broad figure skulking forward—Dick Beech. The fact was noticeable both because it was during hours of labor, and because the ill-favored boatman was regarding Rachel intently.

When he saw Tillotson out of the way, and

did not see Isaac Perkins in ambush, Dick hastened to accost the girl. A look of repugnance crossed her face when she saw him.

"Hullo, missus!" he greeted, in the coarse way common to him.

Rachel nodded and turned away, but he spoke imperiously:

"Hold up! I've got a word ter say!"

"You'll excuse me, sir; I am in haste."

"No; I won't excuse ye; an' you'll hearken ter me ef you value Mal Landgrove's safety."

Rachel regarded him in fear and loathing.

"Speak, then!" she answered.

"That's more like it. I hate like sin ter hev ter order a sister ter stop when I've got a civil word ter say, but you force me to it, yer see."

She stood silent, disdaining to repudiate the alleged relationship.

"I've quit the canal!"

Dick made the statement abruptly, after a brief pause, and then waited as if he expected Rachel to be interested and make comment. She said nothing, so, after another pause, he vindictively added:

"Got fired! Tom Flanders says I'm too fresh, an' quarrelsome, an' lazy, an' a disorganizer, an' incompetent—I b'lieve that's all. I'm fired, an' I'm going ter leave Bighorn valley!"

Rachel's face brightened.

"Seems ter please ye," growled the boatman.

"Wal, I don't dote on the blood-tie betwixt us, an' I'm ready ter quit the valley, for good—ef I kin make my stake. What d'ye s'pose that is?"

"I don't know."

"I've got ter have money."

"You will be paid all that's due you."

"Will I? You don't mean it! Say, d'ye s'pose by 'money' I mean the beggar-wages paid for diggin' that hole in the ground over yender? Bah!—not much! I want a thousand!"

"What is this to me?"

"A heap! I want you ter pay it ter me, to save old Mal Landgrove from the noose. See?"

Rachel had grown pale, but there was spirit in her reply:

"No, sir; I don't see!" she retorted.

"Then I'll explain. The Sacred Comet is the biggest fraud set afoot recent. Nobody expects yender mountain ever ter be tunneled, least of all old Mal, Pom Ash an' Sid Tillotson, the head directors. From the first Mal intended a bunco game. His idea was to collect about ten millions from Eastern dupes, afore a rod o' the ridge was tunneled; an' then take the boodle an' skip."

"It is false!" cried Rachel, with flashing eyes.

"It's true, an' you will know it, some day. What! tunnel that mountain, an' jest ter hev an outlet fur Red Lake, Duck-bill Drift, Ben Eldad, an' a few more camps? Wah! wah! It's nonsense! Amos Smith seen through it."

"He was—mistaken."

"He paid dear fur his mistake!" Dick retorted.

"Perhaps you know who collected the debt!"

"I do; his name is Mal Landgrove."

"Oh!" cried Rachel, "if I were a man, you would not dare say that!"

"A railroad-train run up ag'in' 'if,' once, an' got throwed from the track. 'If' is a right smart sizable word. But we wander from the subjick. I say Mal did the job, an' though he's your father, an' my father, I'm goin' ter prove it ef I ain't paid ter keep mum."

"You will not be paid!"

"Then I'll speak out, and Mal goes up the gallows-stairs. The only way ter save him is ter give me hush-money!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

DICK GOES TO EARTH.

ROUND-UP RUBE could hardly restrain himself from breaking from cover and taking Dick Beech in hand at once, but was reluctant to have Rachel know that "Isaac Perkins" had been acting the listener. He curbed his anger, believing that the boatman would not dare to venture much further.

"This is infamous!" Rachel exclaimed.

"It's business," stoically answered Beech.

"Do you suppose I will accede to your demands?"

"Had you rather hev me brand old Mal?"

"My father, sir, is proof against all base attacks."

"Gammon! Even the rich can't ride rough-shod when they've been exposed. The Sacred Comet is a house of cards, and a word will topple it over. But that ain't all. How about the billin' of Smith?"

"Wretch, I believe that you killed him!" Rachel cried, in excitement.

"Wal, I didn't, but it's all in the family. Mal did it; your old man stopped a dangerous tongue."

"You speak falsely!"

"We talk at random," Dick abruptly declared. "The question is, will you give me the thousand dollars?"

"No. I could not if I would; I have not a thousand dollars—"

"You can get it!"

"You are mistaken; I cannot. Even if I could, I would not—no; not a dollar!" she added, firmly.

"By Judas! I'm goin' to be paid fur my silence!" the boatman declared, violently.

"That is nothing to me, and I do not intend to waste any more words upon you."

She turned toward the house, but Dick started after her.

"See hyar!" he added. "You wear a gold watch and some jewels. Give them ter me, an' I'll call it quits."

"I will not!"

"You won't? See hyar, ag'in; I ain't a dog fur you ter throw crabbed words at. I'll show ye—"

He grasped her arm savagely, but his outbreak came to an abrupt end. Venerable Isaac Perkins broke from his covert, took a few long steps and reached the boatman's side. Before the latter was aware of his danger, a strong grasp was upon his own arm, and he was flung to the earth with a shock which brought pain in its train. He struggled up, furious with anger, only to be knocked down by a clean blow from the shoulder.

Perkins then stood over him threateningly.

"Lie still, ruffian!" he ordered.

Dick looked up, brushed his dim eyes, and gasped:

"Oh! it's you?"

"It is I."

"I'll have your life for this!"

"Empty words!" answered he of the gray beard, with perfect coolness. "You will behave yourself, or take a term in a place where you'll have to behave. Prison doors yawn for you; see that you don't enter them."

"Come off, with your sermon!"

"I haven't any sermon for you. What you need is a heavy hand, to deal with you as knaves should be dealt with. I warn you not to tempt me again, or you'll fare worse than you've done this time."

The detective then turned to Rachel.

"I'll walk a part of the way home with you," he added.

They went. Dick Beech gathered himself up in a sitting position, and glared after them, but his conqueror's expectation that he would fire upon them was not verified. He drew no weapon, but there was deadly menace in his expression.

Rachel turned a questioning gaze upon her companion. Doubt and fear were expressed therein.

"Mr. Perkins, I owe you very much," she observed.

"Don't mention it, Miss Landgrove."

"You have saved me from a ruffian, and I am not devoid of gratitude."

"I can well believe it, and understand you fully."

"How did you happen along?"

Rube understood what was coming. The troubled look upon her face was easily read under the circumstances, and he determined to stop investigation at once. If given opportunity she would be sure to ask if he had overheard Beech's demand, and the reason for it.

"I was passing through the timber, after a visit to the canal," he carelessly replied. "It seems that I arrived just in time. Was robbery the motive of the fellow's assault? I had but limited time to study the situation, but I thought I heard him speak of your jewels."

Rachel looked relieved.

"He did try to rob me. But," she hurriedly added, impressed with a new idea, "I don't want him prosecuted for it; the publicity would be very unpleasant to me. Pray mention it to no one!"

"It shall be as you wish," the detective answered.

By this time they were near enough to Landgrove's house to make it quite safe for Rachel to proceed alone, so he left her. He went to the heart of the town, and his movements were rapid as soon as he was out of her sight. Going to the hotel he transformed himself from Isaac Perkins to R. Marsh and went out again.

He wanted to see Dick Beech.

The boatman, it will be remembered, had grown confidential to Rube, in the latter's true character, and the time seemed ripe for further revelations. Discharged from the Sacred Comet, humiliated by his late defeat, and angry at Rachel, he would be in a mood of which, it appeared, something might be made.

It was not hard to find the redoubtable boatman. He had headed for a saloon, and there Rube came upon him. Dick grew delighted at sight of the new-comer.

"Hullo, my bully boy!" was his greeting.

"How's things? Take somethin' with me? Walk up! Tumble up! Drink, an' drown'd yer cares. Hang it all, this yer' is a tough life, old man!"

"Are you in trouble?" Rube asked, quietly.

"Fired from my job."

"That's bad."

"Never mind; I'll be square with them!"

"With whom?"

"Mal Landgrove, Ike Perkins an' the rest. I'm naturally a peaceable an' law-abidin' man, but when I've been hounded clean through the diameter of the earth, I kin turn an' strike out with my talons—so!"

He had drawn a knife, flourished it dramatically, scowled fiercely and taken aim at an imaginary foe. He now drove the long, ugly-looking blade into the table which stood between

him and Marshall, released his hold and left the weapon quivering in its place.

Round-up Rube did not miss the chance to look at it, and he was well rewarded for his attention.

The knife was an exact counterpart of that found in Amos Smith's room so strangely.

The detective grew interested. It was supposed that only two of the knives had been left in Red Lake. He touched the keen edge gingerly.

"That's a darling toy you have," he remarked.

"Right!" the boatman agreed.

"Is it for sale?"

"No."

"Can I buy one like it, here?"

"No, you can't," Dick replied, but without a trace of suspicion.

He drank off the last of a second big dose of whisky and grew more amiable.

"I got that knife of a juggler," he explained, freely. "A wanderin' feller come along hyar an' did some tricks at the shanty fur the men. Naveddo Luque, he called hisself. He had a lot o' knives, all daises; an' I fell in love with them. I bought this of him."

"You must value it highly."

"So I do, but, d'ye know? I lost it a month ago, an' never expected ter find it again, but it was safe all the while. It got mislaid at the shanty, though I s'posed it lost out o' doors, an' Jimmy Rob found it, an' give it back ter me yesterday."

"Is there any other in Red Lake like it?"

"I reckon not. The boys all tried ter buy of Naveddo Luque, but he wouldn't sell."

The matter of the knife was of great importance to Rube. Since Dick's was at hand, it proved that the one found in Smith's room was that which Malachi Landgrove had bought of the wandering juggler. Malachi claimed that he had thrown the weapon down Barrel Sink, but it presented itself as a mute witness against him. What its history had been since he purchased it was uncertain, but the Barrel Sink episode looked flimsy.

"I don't know what this knife will do, yet," observed Beech, after taking another drink.

"I'm drove inter a corner. I came ter Red Lake with a plan, an' the plan is failed. You're a good feller, Marsh, an' I don't mind sayin' that I intended ter bleed old Landgrove afore ever I see the valley, hyar."

"That so?" asked Rube, carelessly.

"Yes. I knowed him of old, an' my mother knowed him afore I was born. She died soon after I came inter the world, an' she left word that she'd been married ter Mal Landgrove, an' that he had deserted her. She had a sister who b'lieved this, an' when I got big enough ter hev ideas, my aunt an' I agreed that we ought ter hev revenge. The result was that my aunt come ter Mal's as housekeeper. Mrs. Sally Hooks, she calls herself."

"I think I've seen her," observed Rube, with a wide yawn.

"She was hot fur revenge, but she didn't take it. Why? Simply because she fell in love with the old gent. He had been left a widderer when Rachel's mother died, an' Sally was fool enough ter think she could step inter the wife's shoes. So she give up the thought o' revenge, an' years rolled by."

"I got ter be a man, an' I made up my mind that ef Landgrove was my father I was goin' ter have my share o' his boodle. I investigated an' got left; I found good proof that my mother had married a low scamp who was sent up fur crime right after, an' died in prison. He was alive when she died, an' as she was a good 'eal refined, I reckon she hated ter hev it knowed she'd married such a reprobate. Spite entered inter her claim ag'in' Landgrove, I reckon, fur they'd had a love affair, but he tired o' her, an' give her the go-by."

CHAPTER XXXII.

A STATEMENT, TRUE OR FALSE.

THE loquacious boatman took another drink, and then resumed his narrative. The whisky had mellowed him, increased his previous good opinion of Rube, and, also, his desire to open his mind fully to some one.

"It was jest my luck not ter hev a rich father, but I was bound ter work the claim, anyhow. I come hyar an' seen my aunt. She was a good 'eal shook up. She liked me right well, an' so did she like Landgrove. That put her betwixt two fires, an' she's had a powerful roastin' sence."

The boatman paused, hesitated, and laughed aloud.

"I've had some fun with Aunt Sally. You see, I never let on ter her that Margaret Arnold—that was my mother, an' her sister, mind ye—had married Rocky Magrath, instead of Landgrove, but kep' on claimin' old Mal fur my pop—I've even told him I was his son—but I'll speak o' that later."

"Yes, I fooled Aunt Sally, an' I got another joke on her. When Amos Smith was killed, my aunt got the idee that I did it, an' I jest humored her in it. At that time my knife was missin', an' she asked me whar it was. When I said 'twas lost, she wouldn't b'lieve it, but would

hev it that I had done up Smith with it. That wa'n't so, of course, but I wouldn't set Mrs. Hooks right. I've had a pile o' fun with her!"

The frankness with which Dick told all this was against the theory that he had killed Smith, really, and Rube was impressed by it.

"It's very strange who *did* do that job," he observed.

"Not ter me."

"No?"

"Not a bit."

The boatman began to cut a cross in the table with his double-edged knife.

"Only one person in the world had any reason fer doin' Smith up," he remarked. "I needn't skeercely explain that the aforesaid man was Landgrove. Ef the Easterner had gone back an' told the stockholders out that way what he thought o' the Sacred Comet, the bubble would hev bu'sted right away. Landgrove took care that he did *not* tell the tale."

"Can you prove that?"

"Ef I kin, the secret is mine," was the cunning reply. "I know a good many secrets o' that house. Jeffords an' the French girl is full o' them."

"What are their secrets?"

"You'll excuse me," Dick returned, with growing caution. "Sech secrets as I have are my stock in trade, an' I want ter git a livin' by them. A secret told abroad is like a claim outlawed."

"Of course it don't interest me much."

"One thing I kin say about Jeffords—he'll bear watchin'. He ain't in Red Lake fur nothin'. He come as an enemy o' the Sacred Comet, an' went right inter the heart o' the gang by gettin' the job as secretary."

"Is he still working against them?"

"Don't know."

"I never heard that he was a dissatisfied stockholder."

"I reckon he ain't a stockholder of any sort."

"Then why is he an enemy of the canal scheme?"

"Now you hev me. I reckon not over two folks in town, besides him, know he come here as an enemy, an' they ain't no idee why he's down on the project. He's a big mystery, Jeffords is."

"I saw Perkins, the detective, wandering around this morning."

Dick thrust his knife into the table viciously. "I'm goin' ter do that feller up, one o' these days!" he declared, venomously.

"Why?"

"Never mind. I've got a grudge ag'in' him." "Suppose," Rube boldly suggested, "he should retaliate by accusing you of killing Smith?"

"Let him do it! I kin prove an *alibi*. The doctor certified that Smith must 'a' been killed as soon as midnight. Wal, that night I sat in the shanty an' played keards from eight o'clock ter four, with four men in the game. A better *alibi* I couldn't ask fur."

This declaration staggered the detective.

"Didn't you say you told Landgrove that you saw him in the garden that night?"

Dick winked sleepily.

"Don't remember tellin' *you* that, but I did so say ter Landgrove. 'Twas a lie, though, told ter scare him, an' he was so fearful o' havin' even a poor boatman speak ag'in' the canal or him—I'd told him about Margaret Arnold—that he handled me with silk gloves; he dassen't make me mad."

The speaker leaned his head against the wall.

"You'll excuse me ef I take a nap, pard," he added.

"Certainly."

Dick said no more, and began to snore inside of five minutes. Rube watched him in keen disappointment. Once, he had thought that he had a strong case against the boatman, but the latter had explained it away by confessing that, in the past, he had acted with bravado and lied freely; and the whole case was dissipated if he *now* told the truth.

And he had been speaking to one to whom he had taken a strong fancy, whom he trusted, and in whom he believed it safe to confide. Instead of a cunning assassin, he stood revealed—if now correctly seen—as an idle braggart; a layer of schemes he had not the brains to carry out; and a man who could prove an *alibi*.

Of all the suspected persons the detective would rather have seen Dick Beech caught in the meshes, but he was afraid that the fellow, vicious and lawless as he was, had slipped out of the net entirely.

Rube had despised him before; he had hated him now, and made haste to leave such company. Returning to the hotel he resumed the face and form of Isaac Perkins and returned to Landgrove's. In the garden he met and was accosted by Jeffords.

"Can I speak with you, Mr. Perkins?"

"Of course," he of the gray beard replied, with all of the blandness peculiar to Isaac. "Say on!"

"I want to speak about Amos Smith's death," added the secretary, gravely, but with an air of candor and freedom.

"Proceed, sir," Perkins graciously answered.

"What I can tell will not help you along much, though it would seem to indicate that the

criminal was a man—a point upon which all do not yet agree—and there might be some aid in that. Mr. Perkins, I have reason to believe that I saw the murderer in the garden that night!"

"Looking from the house?"

"No. I was in the garden."

"But you told me, when I first questioned you, that you were not in the garden that night."

"I spoke falsely!" Jeffords frankly confessed.

"With what object?"

"That I will explain."

"How shall you speak this time?"

"I shall speak the truth. I don't wonder that you doubt me, but I will make all clear. Once, Mr. Perkins, I lived in New York City, and, on a certain occasion, was in a police court. That day I saw on trial a woman, young, beautiful and innocent of look, but she was charged with being a thief; with having taken diamonds from a house where she was employed."

The speaker's voice quavered a little at this point, but Perkins benignly observed:

"Lamentable!"

"Time passed," Jeffords proceeded. "The scene shifted to Red Lake. I came here, entered Mr. Landgrove's house as secretary, and—found the young woman there. It was a surprise to me. I knew that, through a failure of the jury to agree, she had been allowed to go free, but did not know what had become of her."

"No wonder you were surprised."

"She was Mazette Duane; she had made no effort to change her name. I did not betray her to Landgrove. Call it sentiment or what you will, I always believed her innocent; I had not chanced my mind. I kept silent, but sat down and wrote to a friend in New York, asking him to investigate and see if the diamond mystery had ever been solved."

"Day by day I saw Miss Duane in yonder house, and we were friends. I suspected that she knew me; she suspected that I knew her, but it was some time before we spoke plainly."

"On the night of Smith's death I met Miss Duane in the garden by chance. We had a long talk, in which we referred unreservedly to the past."

"We finally separated, but something else was in store for us. Mazette, on her way, encountered Amos Smith, and he, being in a vicious mood, became offensive at once. He, too, it seems, had seen her on trial in New York, and out of pure malevolence, he declared that he would make her story public, and ruin her in the eyes of Red Lake people."

"I interfered, and I freely confess that Smith and I had a struggle. He tried to strike me. I did not seek to return the blow, and only gave him a shaking. That is a plain statement of fact."

"At my request Mazette left us and went to the house. I reprimanded Smith severely, and then followed."

"On the way I saw another man in the garden. I cared nothing for him, and sought to avoid his notice, not desiring to see any one; so I am not able to describe him further than to say that he was somewhat tall, and had a white handkerchief in his hand—a useless description, surely."

Round-up Rube was not so sure of that. He remembered that Landgrove was "somewhat tall," and, also, he remembered the handkerchief, marked with Landgrove's name, found in Barrel Sink.

It might mean a good deal or nothing.

"Proceed," he said, encouragingly.

"The next day came the news of Smith's death. Perhaps you can surmise now why Mazette and I both falsely declared that we had not been in the garden that night."

"We did not know each other well, and when I remembered that Smith had threatened to expose her, and she remembered that she had left me alone with Smith, we rushed to a common conclusion."

"Each thought that the other might be guilty; each resolved to protect the other."

"There is but one explanation of why we did this; why we falsely declared to you that we were not in the garden; and why our manner has since been strange, and, perhaps, agitated—we had become interested one in the other."

"We now know that we can feel this interest freely."

"The fear and suspense told upon Mazette, and she resolved to depart secretly, never to return. She fled. I, however, had suspected her purpose, and was soon in pursuit. Thanks to you, sir, she was saved, and came back here."

"On the return journey she and I had a full, long conversation, and the result of mutual explanation was mutual confidence restored. Satisfied that no guilt lay with us, our very manner changed, I think, before you all."

"The best of all remains to be told."

"To-day I have had word from my friend in New York that the diamond mystery was long since cleared up, and that Mazette had no connection with it. Hence she is able to face the whole world, and I am proud to stand by her side."

"Enough of that. I thought it my duty, Mr. Perkins, to tell you that Smith went to the garden of his own free will, and that there was another man skulking there when I left."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE REVENGE OF A WOMAN SCORNED.

"CAN you give me no information to make this clew of value?" Rube asked.

"Unfortunately, I cannot," Jeffords answered.

"Do you think it was a member of the household?"

"I do not, sir."

"And why not?"

"Because I think it was Smith's slayer."

"Am I to infer from this that you think the members of the household above suspicion?"

"Exactly."

"Can you name nothing that the skulker wore?"

"He seemed," Jeffords replied, with an air of careful reflection, "to be well dressed; he showed a certain air of form and neatness not to be exhibited by one dressed slouchily."

"Are you good at recognizing persons after nightfall?"

"Under favorable circumstances I am; but, in this case, I wished to avoid notice, myself, as I said before, so I gave the man only casual attention."

The secretary's manner was very frank, but Round-up Rube was not inclined to let him escape so easily.

"Were your feelings toward Smith those of friendship, Mr. Jeffords?"

"Until his treatment of Mazette, we had never had any trouble."

"Is it not a fact, nevertheless, that you were anxious not to have him go away from here and spread an unfavorable report of the canal project?"

The detective's keen gaze studied Mark's face, and he did not fail to detect some embarrassment.

"Naturally," was the reply.

"And why 'naturally'?"

"As an employee, I was concerned in the success of the canal."

"Was that all?"

"What more could there be? I had not a dollar invested in the enterprise, myself."

"And you had no secret motive?"

"My sympathies were all with Mr. Landgrove, and, putting all selfishness aside, I wanted to see him succeed in a worthy enterprise which was dear to him."

Jeffords made a show of speaking frankly, but his evasion was plain to Marshall. Despite all that the secretary had said, he still had a secret, and he clung to it tenaciously.

Rube did not press the point further, but allowed it to drop entirely. In Isaac Perkins's blandest style he thanked the secretary for the information given, and then they separated. The detective at once went to his room.

He had a good deal to meditate upon. By a combination of circumstances two men whom he had held under suspicion—Dick Beech and Jeffords—had been led to speak out, and if their statements were true, each had cleared himself of all connection with Smith's death. But were they true? Was it not possible that, seeing themselves menaced by danger, they had adopted the plan of making revelations apparently frank, with the hope of throwing him off the track?

If they had spoken truly, how did the case stand?

The finger of suspicion pointed more darkly than ever to Malachi Landgrove.

Some one had killed Amos Smith—who, if not the President of the Sacred Comet?

Rube, however, did not forget that his life had been attempted twice since he came to Red Lake. At Barrel Sink some one had tried to crush him by casting a rock into the natural shaft, and, during the bear-shooting event, a bullet had come even nearer to winding up his earthly career. On the last occasion, at least, Landgrove had not been present—but Jeffords had.

The fact might be significant.

A rap sounded at the detective's door; he bade the applicant enter, and Kate Graham appeared. Marshall at once perceived that something was on the girl's mind. Her eye glittered peculiarly, and her face had a hard, tense look which was not pleasant.

"Can I talk with you?" she asked, abruptly.

"Certainly."

"Have you got the murderer?"

"No."

"Do you want him?"

"By all means—yes!"

"What if I help you?"

"There is a reward offered. If you can point out the murderer, giving information so that I can arrest him at once, I promise you the lion's share of the reward. Should it be but the beginning of a protracted battle, we shall have to divide in some other fashion; possibly, share and share alike."

"Is written evidence good?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"Who wrote it. A man's own writing may condemn him utterly; that of another person may be more boomerang than boom."

"Read that!"

Kate flashed a sheet of note-paper out of her

pocket, and flung it at the detective as viciously as if he were a dog and the paper a bone.

Rube suspected what was coming. Kate had made a bold set for Mark Jeffords's love, and had tried to part him and Mazette. Recent developments had probably shown her that her plans had failed, and now it would be the most likely thing in the world for her to use the incriminating letter she boasted that she held over Jeffords.

And when Rube saw the writing on this particular sheet, he readily recognized the bold, free hand of the secretary.

He read as follows:

"If Smith gets back to Brooklyn alive, he will ruin the whole thing without presenting any proof. He judges only by what he sees, and what all men can see, but is headstrong enough to think that sufficient. If he puts his scare into Eastern minds he lays out all competitors, for a scare will lead to investigation. Such being the case, Smith must be stopped, else I am done up. I must knock him out. Just how I shall do it I can't say, but such an unreasonable old fellow is not going to kill the Sacred Comet. I'll put a quietus on him, or—"

There the writing ended, the lower half of the sheet having been torn off.

"Look on the other side," Kate directed.

Rube obeyed.

The writing was continued, and he found there the following words:

"That there was such an agreement I know positively. The exact nature of it is unknown to me, but there can be no doubt—I think—that the leading stockholders of the Sacred Comet, Landgrove, Ash and Tillotson, formed a conspiracy to defraud their followers."

"Want of confidence led to a plain statement of the case and their intentions in writing, and it was signed by each of the conspirators."

"Just as it was completed there was an accident on the canal, and all but Ash hurriedly left the office, to look to it. I was not then an employee of the company, but when several men entered the office to ask for particulars, I went along, also. Ash stood looking out of the window, and the agreement lay upon the desk."

"If I had known then just what it was I would have had it at all costs; as it was, menaced by discovery, I merely took it and slipped it into a jacket of other papers which lay untied in a stout blue wrapping paper, (which was marked, 'R. L., S. C. & M. C.,') and let it rest there."

"The paper is lost. Since beginning work here I have looked for it in vain—"

Again the writing ended abruptly.

"Well?" questioned Kate.

"Well?" repeated Mr. Perkins, blandly.

"Don't mimic me!" the girl retorted, impatiently. "What d'yemake of it?"

"It is confused."

"Don't it prove that Jeffords killed Smith?"

"Do you think it does?"

"Yes."

"It is suspicious."

"Mind you, he says that 'if Smith gets back to Brooklyn alive' he will ruin all, and then goes on to say that 'Smith must be stopped,' and that he will 'put a quietus on him!' Now what does that mean?"

"Clearly," Perkins benignly remarked, "he knew that Smith was not friendly to the Sacred Comet."

Kate stamped viciously upon the floor.

"Haven't you any wits?" she demanded.

"Eh?" returned he of the gray beard, simulating great surprise.

"Why don't you act like a man of sense? You've got evidence before you—what are you going to do about it?"

"I shall investigate," responded Isaac, placidly, showing no evidence that he resented Kate's severe terms.

"Don't you think him guilty?"

"It looks ominous."

"Well, I tell you he is guilty. I can see as far into a grindstone as anybody else, and there ain't any chance to doubt what I say. Jeffords is guilty. Shall you arrest him at once?"

"That would be imprudent. Some other things must be done before we take him in. Leave that to me, pray. And you, I thank you heartily for your kind and shrewd aid"—he paused to let the words act, if they would—"and will see that you get your share of whatever reward may come of the secretary's arrest. One thing is highly important, however: you must be shrewd and careful, and not let any human being suspect that you have told me anything, or contemplate doing so!"

"Trust me for that!"

"That's all, Miss Graham."

He bowed her out politely, but with a feeling of disgust for her in his heart; she had never tried to aid him until, seeing that she could not gain Jeffords's love, she had struck this blow for revenge.

Left alone, the detective murmured:

"I think I can place my hands upon the missing paper!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE BLUE-COVERED PACKAGE.

MIDNIGHT!

Isaac Perkins left the house, passed through the garden and wandered on down the street. As he went he mentally summed up the case.

"According to the written statement of the

secretary, the leading members of the Sacred Comet entered into an agreement, by which they jointly and severally promised to defraud the unsophisticated stockholders, and put the same in writing—a foolish thing to do, though the object would seem to be lack of confidence in each other.

"Jeffords saw this paper lying on the desk, forgotten by them in the rush of other events. Knowing he might be seen, he dared not appropriate it, but he did the next best thing.

"On the desk was a package of other papers, lying in a wrapper which was not folded tightly around them. The wrapper was of stout blue paper, marked 'R. L., S. C. & M. C.'—the initials of the Red Lake, Sacred Comet & Missouri Canal.

"He thrust the alleged agreement in among these other papers, acting, perhaps, upon impulse, and left it there. He has never been able to find it.

"Now, I think I can find it. In the court-house, when I visited it with Landgrove, I saw a package on a shelf which, I verily believe, was the same to which Jeffords referred. In any case, it had a wrapper of stout blue paper, marked with the initials, 'R. L., S. C. & M. C.'

"I must see that package!"

To see it he must enter the court-house, and this he believed that he should be able to do without trouble. He went at once to Sheriff Ball's house, and soon had that gentleman in conversation.

"Take you to the court-house?" Ball repeated, in surprise. "Why, certainly, if you wish; but I can't see what you expect to find there."

"I'll show you when we arrive."

"Very well, I'll go."

The sheriff secured the key, and they started. The journey was short, and the building was soon reached. Ball opened the door, and they entered.

At this point the detective experienced a feeling of unpleasant nervousness. If all accounts were reliable, and the paper had not been reclaimed, and he was correct in thinking he had located the package, he would soon be in possession of damaging evidence. If Landgrove, Ash and Tillotson had signed such a paper, they would be branded as dishonorable men, at the least.

The echoing of their steps in the lofty, lonely hall struck a chill to Rube's veins. He thought of Rachel. If he convicted Malachi Landgrove, he would seal his own fate. Should he cling to duty, ruin the President of the Sacred Comet, and give up Rachel, or should he destroy all the evidence he found and reap the reward in Rachel's love?

"Proceed with your duty," spoke Ball.

Duty! The word fell forcibly upon the ex-cowboy's ears. He aroused; he turned; he went on with a fixed purpose. He was the slave of the law, and its bidding must be done.

At his request no light was shown. In darkness they ascended to the "upper hall," so called. There, a light could be maintained safely, for enterprising Red Lake had iron shutters on every window, and no ray would give tell-tale signs to a chance traveler outside.

When the light was made it was not hard for Rube to find the package. It was upon a shelf, and the stout blue paper was folded and tied around the contents. He took it down; the letters, 'R. L., S. C. & M. C.' met his gaze.

"What in the world do you seek there?" Ball asked. "Those are official papers."

"All of them?"

"Yes."

"We will see—with your permission."

"Certainly. Proceed!"

The detective placed the package upon a desk, untied it, and began to glance briefly at each of the several papers it contained. As Ball had stated, they were official documents, and each was indorsed in the writer's official capacity as treasurer of Red Lake—"Approved; Malachi Landgrove, Treas."

Nothing very promising in the outlook, was the conclusion to be drawn.

"Those papers," Ball observed, "relate solely to city business, and can interest no one, I should say."

"Yes."

Rube answered quietly, and, having laid down one paper, took up the next in order. It was indorsed just as the others had been, but, as the detective unfolded it he noticed a great difference in the contents. None of the blanks between the printed matter had been filled in, but there was compact writing below, and at the top of said writing stood these written words:

"Agreement between the stockholders of the Sacred Comet Canal mentioned below."

Clearly, this had no reference to legal or official business of Red Lake, and Marshall knew that he had found the document he sought.

He glanced down to see the signatures, but a fold of the paper concealed them, and he dared not pause to examine further, with Ball at his shoulder.

He refolded the paper.

"Have I your permission to take this?" he asked.

"What use is it to you?"

"A good deal."

"Surely, a paper relating solely to town affairs cannot also relate to your case."

"Nevertheless, I want this."

"I have no authority to surrender it."

"Yet, I think we two can take the risk."

"Why not consult Mr. Landgrove?"

"Since coming here, Mr. Ball, I have made you my only confidant, and must ask that the rule be continued if I am to remain in the case."

"But Landgrove is town treasurer, while I have no authority—"

"Then I will take the paper on my own responsibility!" declared the detective.

"Well, do as you think best. Far be it from my purpose to oppose a worthy step of yours, but, as I have said, I have no authority to let this paper go. If, however, you assume all the risk, I have no more to say. Act as you see fit."

"That's better, Mr. Ball. Later, I hope to show you that I am acting wisely."

Rube went over the rest of the documents, to make sure that the he had the right one, and then arranged the blue-covered package as he found it.

"Now, I'm ready to go out with you," he announced, and he rose.

The sheriff looked doubtful, for he knew that if trouble came of this affair he would be blamed severely. Really, he had stretched his authority by admitting Perkins, at all, while the removal of the paper was far worse. He said no more, however.

When the light had been extinguished, they prepared to leave the building. The door of the room was opened, and they passed out and descended to the lower floor.

They had nearly reached the outer door when a sudden, sharp sound broke upon their ears. Rube did not know what it was, and felt but little interest in it, but Ball caught him by the arm.

"Hark!" he exclaimed. "What was that?"

"'Twas the breaking of something."

"I may be absurd," the sheriff continued, "but it seemed to me like the snapping of a bar to one of our shutters. I've often noticed how easily they could be pried off."

"Look to it, then."

"I will. Wait a second! I'll light a dark-lantern we have here, and go outside; and do you enter the court-room and look to that place."

Working with zeal, the speaker soon had the lantern burning. Then, shutting off the light, he passed out, while Rube went about his share of the work. The court-room into which he passed, was of good size, but having been there once before, he could find his way without trouble.

On the east side of the place the darkness was broken. At one window the shutters were not closed, and, as Rube looked in that direction, he clearly saw a human head raised for a moment into view.

The inference was plain; some one was trying to enter burglariously.

Quietly the detective moved forward and stood by the window. Looking outside he could see a dark figure, the owner of which was busy with further preparations.

But he did not finish them.

He straightened up suddenly and turned toward the right. Beyond doubt, he had seen Ball.

One look sufficed, and he turned to flee. Then a ray of light flashed out and fell upon his head, and Rube recognized him!

Another moment and the would-be burglar was in retreat, going at full speed. Ball rushed after him, and the ex-cowboy was left alone. He stood by the window in deep thought, unconscious of the lapse of time, until the sheriff returned, alone, and breathing hard.

"He outraced me," Ball admitted.

"Where did he go?"

"I don't know; he dodged in and among the houses, and I lost all trace of him."

"Did you recognize him?"

"No. Did you?"

"I was not properly situated," Rube responded, evasively.

"He was a common thief, of course—perhaps one of the canal hybrids. Let me see if I can fix the window."

Examination showed that the damage done was not great, and Ball succeeded in repairing it. He would not run any risks, however, and announced his intention of staying there all night, hoping to make a capture.

The detective bade him good-night and went back to Landgrove's. Once in his own room, he sat down and held the precious compact to the light, to read it through.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE SECRET OF THE LEATHERN TRUNK.

THAT same night Dick Beech came to grief. The drunken condition in which Round-up Rube left him, continued. When he awoke from his whisky-laden sleep he drank more whisky, and it had evil effect.

He grew ugly, and imbibed not only the liquid enemy of man, but a desire to be revenged for his discharge from the service of the Sacred Comet. All his anger turned against Thomas

Flanders, the superintendent, and he sought the house where that person boarded.

By that time it was so late that there was doubt of finding Flanders up, but up he was, and he came out when Dick called for him.

The superintendent, though an able manager of such a gang of men as worked on the R. L., S. C. & M. C., was not one to command respect in any way except as to muscle. He was coarse, ignorant, boisterous and low; but he had bulldog courage, and, though he scented trouble, did not hesitate, then, to face the boatman unarmed.

Trouble followed, beginning with words, in which Dick led the way, but was ably, if not commendably, followed by Flanders; and then they came to blows.

Beech was a dangerous man in such an encounter, but he had to deal with one always his superior, and had his liquor-sodden condition against him. The result was that he received severe punishment, and was knocked about more freely than agreeably.

His passions rose higher and higher, and he drew the knife he had purchased of Naveddo Luque, the juggler, and struck out furiously.

His aim was good, and Flanders reeled back, clutched at vacancy, and fell to the ground.

Beech fled.

The cool air upon his forehead gradually brought a measure of common sense. He had only to look at his knife to realize that he had done a deed which might cost him dear, and the cowardly element in his nature rose in arms and made itself felt.

Perhaps Flanders was dead. The boatman imagined himself arrested, tried and brought to the gallows. Perspiration started out on his person, and he evaded the few persons whom he met with all of an assassin's guilty fears.

The liquor was being driven from his mind, now that it had done its work, and he considered measures of safety. He must flee—but where? There was no safety in any camp in the valley, and the way out was not a road to be traveled rapidly.

Clearly, the wild, unsettled mountain furnished the only safe place.

"I'll go, but I must hev an understandin' with somebody hyar, who will help me, an' git me food at reg'lar periods. Who kin I trust? O'Toole? Lopez? Badeau? Pachiskoff? No; they hev drank with me, but they'd betray me for a gallon o' whisky. Hal thar's Rube Marsh! I ain't knowed him long, but he's a royal good feller, an' I kin trust him. I'll go thar, at once!"

Through the town he went, skulking like a hunted wolf, seeing an enemy in every harmless shadow, and trembling at every sound of human voices. Truly, the bravo was cowed, and humbled to the dust.

He reached the hotel.

Although he had never been in Round-up Rube's room he knew its location.

He found it dark, but did not hesitate to enter at the window. Believing that the occupant had retired he struck a match, but its transient light showed the bed to be unoccupied.

The room was like a haven of safety, and he curtained the window and lighted the lamp. Then he noticed a card upon the table and, finding written words upon it, read them.

"Gone away; shall return in two days."

In point of fact the words had been written by Rube before he ever saw Red Lake, and it was only chance that the card lay there; but Dick took it to be recent work.

It threw him into despair; his last hope seemed to vanish with absence of the man he erroneously believed was his friend. He soon had another idea, however, and looked at the leathern trunk which stood in one corner.

"Ef I could hev some o' his dandified clothes, an' fix up, nobody'd ever know me."

He regarded himself in the mirror, and pulled at his slender mustache with momentary complacency.

"Reckon I kin pass as a gent," he decided.

Unfortunately for him the trunk was locked, and he could not find the key. He dared not pound or wrench the lock, lest he be overheard by some other lodger—he remembered having heard that Isaac Perkins had a room there—but, being resolved to secure the coveted garments, he had recourse to another plan.

Kneeling down, he drew his keen knife along the side of the trunk, throwing all his strength into the work, and cut the side open neatly.

A little more work completed the ruin, and placed the contents subject to his will.

"I s'pose Marsh will howl," he muttered, "but a feller can't be fastidjus in sech a crisis."

He flung the garments out upon the floor, but the result startled him afresh. Among the other things he saw a gray wig and false beard, and they called up unpleasant possibilities. He lifted the first coat he came to. It had a very familiar look, and he remained in one position, holding it out in front of him, for several moments. Then he looked at the box and found other things—bottles filled with peculiar-colored liquids.

An idea was working in Dick's mind. It was a dull mind, and not fitted for the quick grasping of anything; but various little facts re-

turned to him, and he had the explanation at last.

"By Judas! Marsh is Ike Perkins!" he whispered, in a fright.

The proof was clear enough for him, and it brought consternation in its train. He had poured out all his secrets to "R. Marsh"—what had he said? what had he not said?

He could not tell. His life before coming to Red Lake had been criminal. Perhaps he had revealed enough to ruin him; to send him to prison for life.

Frightened by these thoughts, he no longer desired anything in the room, or to remain there, himself. He extinguished the light, raised the window with trembling hands, and fled from the hotel and the town.

When he found shelter it was in a hole among the rocks, and there he managed to cool his fevered blood a good deal. His courage, too, returned, and his anger rose against Round-up Rube as it had previously arisen against Flanders.

He longed to strike a blow at the man who had inveigled him into so much free talk, and knew that in no way could he do so much harm as by betraying the secret of the detective's double life.

He had the exact idea, at last, and, when day dawned, he was concealed in Landgrove's garden and awaiting a certain event.

Luck favored him; luck was against some one else.

Rachel Landgrove came out to gather flowers for her room, and was confronted by the boatman. Never pleasant to look at, he appeared worse than ever on that morning. A sleepless night, and a bed among the rocks, had made him thoroughly disreputable of appearance. He frightened Rachel, and she would have moved on hurriedly, but he stopped her.

"Hold up!—I want ter speak ter you! I've got somethin' important ter say. Don't be afeerd!"

His surly growl changed to more persuasive speech, for he saw that she was alarmed, and knew that he would have to use diplomacy to get her attention.

She paused and looked at him with shrinking curiosity.

"What's Ike Perkins?" Dick asked, abruptly.

"I don't know."

"He ain't at the house, eh?"

"No. He was gone when we rose this morning, and we do not know where he is."

"I opined as much. Gal, d'ye know who he is?"

"Who he is?" Rachel repeated, mechanically.

"Yes."

"I suppose he is—Isaac Perkins."

"Wal, he ain't!" the boatman declared, with concentrated fury. "The man is a Judas Iscariot, an' he's fooled us all. He's fooled me, an' he's fooled *you*!"

"Fooled me!" Rachel repeated, changing color.

"Yes. He's a man with two faces; a double-faced scoundrel; a traitor; a man in disguise; an' when you see old Ike Perkins, you only see a bogus representation of the original. You know him in his true character, *you* do!"

"You are mistaken."

"No, I ain't. Go ask R. Marsh!"

"What does he know about it?"

"Much—everything! Perkins is Marsh in disguise!"

"It is false!—I don't believe it!"

"Let him deny it ef he dares. Look you, did ye never hear of Round-up Rube, the Cowboy Detective? Few folks know that his real name is Rube Marshall, or he would never 'a' dared ter play his part hyar. 'R. Marsh' is Round-up Rube Marshall, an' he is Ike Perkins, a man in disguise."

Rachel grew pale. She had heard of "Round-up Rube," but did not know his last name, and had never thought of connecting him with R. Marsh. She was very reluctant to believe, now, but doubts would rush upon her. Dick's manner was that of a man who was telling the truth, and she remembered how she often had wondered at Perkins's mysterious absence, at times.

"The man has done me up bad!" pursued Beech, with growing resentment. "I should hev avoided Perkins, but, as Marsh, he made my acquaintance, acted fair, an' wormed all my secrets out on me."

What a flood of recollection rushed over Rachel.

R. Marsh had enjoyed her confidence; he had been her putative champion; she had told him her secrets; and he had received all with outward composure.

No doubt he had led her on deliberately, to get all the points he could. And his professed love for her—was that a sham? a pretense governed only by a desire to make her talk the more freely?

"Oh! Judas, Judas!" she murmured, her thoughts divided between indignation and keen sorrow.

Beech looked around warily. Not yet did he know whether Thomas Flanders was living or dead, but, in any case, he was in danger of arrest for attempt to kill.

"My time is brief, an' I must go," he announced.

"I've told ye the truth, an' I felt that I must. I leave ye now to deal with the double-faced traitor. It's fur you ter say *how* you'll deal with him, but I swear I've told nothin' but the truth. Good-by!"

With another wary look around him the boatman began his retreat, scanning each bush with an assassin's fear of discovery. He went, and left Rachel alone with the new discovery and her sorrow.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE STOCKHOLDERS OF THE SACRED COMET.

AN hour later Malachi Landgrove was seated in the Sacred Comet office, with Sheriff Ball for a companion.

"I must go about my work," the latter was saying. "I opine that I have a job ahead of me. Dick Beech will try his best to look out for Number One, and, naturally, will take to the mountains. It will not be easy to find him there."

"Do your best, sheriff," Landgrove returned.

"The chances, according to the doctor, are that Flanders will recover, but it was an atrocious assault, and Beech must be made to feel the full rigors of the law."

"Oh! I'll nab him."

"Suppose you ask Perkins's help?"

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"Nor I."

"At times," Landgrove added, thoughtfully, "my faith in that man's ability wavers—but, never mind. Flanders is dangerously hurt. Run Dick Beech down, and you shall be duly rewarded."

"I'm off!" Ball answered, and proved his assertion by going.

Landgrove turned to his morning's mail, of which he had a large supply, and had examined only a part, and sighed deeply as he did so.

The next letter opened was dated at Philadelphia, and was as follows:

"I write this to ask if I can dispose of the \$10,000 stock which I have in the R. L., S. C. & M. C. I fully realize that if I were to hold it, it would pay me big money in the future, but unexpected complications here make it necessary for me to have all the cash, at once, which I can get. Such being the case, I should be glad to sell out all of my Sacred Comet stock, to you or others, and at a less figure than I paid. I'll deduct \$500 on the total. Can I sell? Please answer at once."

Without a word, Landgrove opened the next letter in order.

Dated at Chicago, it contained this communication:

"I want to pull out of the Sacred Comet. Rumors are flying here which place the canal and its directors in a bad light. I do not care to figure in the enterprise. Tell me what discount I must make to re-sell to you at once."

This letter was as blunt as the first was cautious, but both indicated the same facts.

Evil reports had spread concerning the Sacred Comet, and the stockholders, panic-stricken, were anxious to withdraw from a scheme which, they believed, would rob them of every dollar they had in it.

The two above-mentioned were not alone, that morning, in their demand. Other similar letters were there, all showing conclusively that the panic was radical and complete.

When the last had been examined, Landgrove found himself in a profuse perspiration. He was mopping his forehead, and staring at the letters, pallid and dismayed, when Ash and Tillotson entered.

These three men were the head, center and brains of the project, and the last two at once showed why they had come.

"What news?" Pomeroy Ash asked, abruptly.

"The very worst!" Landgrove almost groaned.

"More weak-kneed stockholders?"

"A perfect deluge of them. Look! There are letters from men representing over one-third of the entire stock sold by us to outsiders, and every man wants his money back!"

"What do you intend to do?"

"Re-buy of every man who requests it!"

"This policy has been followed during the past week—"

"According to our agreement."

"Suppose," Ash continued, "that we take back all that is offered us. Where shall we land? Much money has already been put out for work, tools, and so on. That can't be reclaimed. If we buy back all outside stock, what shall we have left? A hole in the ground over yonder, and not a dollar in our own pockets. It will leave us beggars—you, and I, and Tillotson."

"We shall have our honor left!"

"Will that feed us and our families?"

"It will give us sleep at night."

"We have gone far enough in this prodigal devotion to honor," Ash declared. "We started a legitimate enterprise and put our money into it. We gave others chance to buy stock, and they did it, gladly. Then came a fool here—a Jewish mischief-maker—a man who had not one dollar in the enterprise, and with a mind closed to conviction. When he left Brooklyn he was bound to condemn. He did condemn, and, though forever still now, he sent false reports abroad."

"And we are reaping what he sowed," added Tillotson, gloomily.

"These false reports made timid stockholders weaken," Ash went on, with growing emphasis, "and some of them wanted to sell their stock back to us. Thus far we have taken all that was offered, but it is time to call a halt!"

"Surely you would not refuse—"

"I would! These men went into an honest speculation with open eyes. I say, let them abide by the consequences!"

"But the dissatisfaction—"

"How about our dissatisfaction if we pay out all the money in our treasury, and take as our share that hole in the ground which represents what has already been expended?"

"But our honor—"

"Have done with sentimentality!" exclaimed Ash, forcibly. "This is business, not a matter of fine words. Do we wrong these men who have willingly bought stock? You know we don't; so why should we humor their scare, and let them ruin us?"

"We must have more money than we have gathered yet, to complete the tunnel, and it is certain that we can't get it as things are now. Neither can we finish the canal without more money. The Sacred Comet seems to be doomed. Why not give back the stockholders' money, since we can't finish the work."

"And beggar ourselves?"

Landgrove turned to Tillotson.

"How do you stand in the case?" he asked.

"Frankly, I am with Mr. Ash."

"Sidney, you are young. When your hair becomes white you will see differently."

Ash touched his own patriarchal beard.

"Am I not white?"

"Outwardly, you are. How is it inwardly?"

"This is idle talk," Ash exclaimed, impatiently.

"Let's put it to a vote!"

"Why should we do that, if Tillotson is with you? Our votes all count alike, and you are two to one against me."

"Fortunately, we are."

Landgrove passed his hand wearily across his forehead.

"Pomeroy, I wish that you saw this matter as I do. We are both old men, and justice to all our fellow-beings should be our guiding principle."

"Nonsense! You are in a sentimental mood; but I am bound that our stockholders shall stand by a contract made honorably on both sides."

"I have a daughter," continued Landgrove, in a trembling voice, "but I would rather see her share poverty with me than disgrace. The Sacred Comet is doomed; that I plainly see. We can never raise the money to complete the work now."

"We can try."

"The project has been the pet scheme of my life. More than selfish gain has entered into it. I thought it an achievement grand to accomplish, and one of vast benefit to every settler in the valley. Ambition with me dies with the Sacred Comet!"

His shaking voice ceased entirely, and tears rolled down his ashen cheeks.

"We are not beaten yet!" Tillotson declared.

"I see no hope."

"But I do, and I will devote every energy to the task. We will not let another stockholder withdraw, but will ask them to designate the best, or, if they wish, a dozen of the best engineers in the country, and have them come here to examine the ridge, and pronounce on the feasibility of our project."

Landgrove shook his head.

"It is too late," he replied, with a sigh. "The Sacred Comet is hopelessly ruined!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE MYSTERIOUS LEADER OF THE THREE.

RACHEL walked toward the canal.

It was the afternoon of the day to which reference has last been made, and she was in a mood of deep trouble and dejection. Thus far she had not seen Perkins or Marsh, but the conviction was growing upon her that they were, indeed, one and the same person.

Now that her suspicions were awakened, she found a multitude of circumstances which went to prove Dick Beech's charge, but she was resolved not to believe until compelled to do so. At times she believed nothing; then a downcast mood would come upon her, and life did not seem worth living.

Had Rube really sought her confidence, and professed love he did not feel, merely to gain all her secrets and envelop her father in a net?

In the midst of her own sorrow she saw that her father was equally miserable. Not yet had he told her how desperate was the condition of the Sacred Comet, but she suspected a part of the truth.

And when, that afternoon, she saw him go over toward the canal, she was worried in regard to him, and followed after.

In the timber she regained sight of him. He had stopped short of the canal, and was seated upon a fallen tree, buried in gloomy thought.

She paused and observed him, but, as he did not stir, there was but little to hold her attention except the evidence of his sorrow. Something else became more exciting.

Back of him was a thicket, and, as she looked, she saw the bushes quiver as though an animal was moving there. Something came out, but it was a man—a man who skulked like a wolf, and developed signs of evil intentions.

He crept toward Landgrove, and Rachel saw he held a knife in his hand. On his hands and knees he progressed, his gaze fixed upon the old man, and his whole manner furtive and ominous.

Rachel, surprised and alarmed, watched without being able to move. The unknown drew nearer; the danger grew imminent.

Suddenly she aroused and uttered a cry. Landgrove sprang to his feet. At the same moment the man leaped forward and made a stroke with his knife, but it fell short, only gashing the canal president's coat.

The latter saw his danger and looked for a weapon, while Rachel gained his side and confronted the would-be assassin. Easy prey they would have been had he persisted in his mode of attack, but he did not.

He whistled, and two other rough, ragged fellows sprang from the same covert.

United, they attacked Malachi and his daughter.

It was a one-sided contest, and if the former plan had been persisted in, would have ended in tragedy. As it was, their struggles and cries were alike useless. They were overcome, bound, and bandages were tied over their mouths to prevent further outcry.

Then horses were produced; they were mounted; and the evil trio hurried away with the Landgroves as prisoners.

All things favored them, and they were not interrupted.

They made a detour to avoid the canal, passing close to the ridge, and then curved around toward the northern range. The lonely passes, there, were finally reached. Until then all had gone in silence, but one of the three finally broke loose.

"A good job well done!" he commented. "We're the boys ter do it. I'm a wild war-hoss o' the Rockies! I'm an alligator with seventy-one teeth on ev'ry jaw! I'm a cannon-ball with legs! I'm Hercules with an epizootic o' muskle! Hey Sim Soden?"

"Right, bully boy!"

"I'm Ham Flint, the blunderbuss that vomits smoke an' layval! I'm a robber baron o' the ranges! Wah, wah!"

"Wah! Wah!" echoed Sim Soden, swaying in the saddle and distorting his already-hideous face.

The two ruffians who had so frightened Mazette on the Duck-bill Drift trail had come to light again, and they proceeded to conduct them with the bravado and absurdity shown on the previous occasion. They boasted, they told of deeds of violence, they leered at the prisoners, and manifested the worst side of their repulsive natures.

But the third abductor sat silent. They talked, but he never spoke; like a statue he rode on his way, but he it was who had made the first attack upon Landgrove, and, plainly, the men looked to him for orders.

He was as ragged and dirty as they, and his bushy hair and beard had been long unknowing to care, but his peculiar manner suggested a mystery. Who was he? Why was he taking the Landgroves away into captivity?

He, and Soden and Flint, and the prisoners, and the secret, passed along the trackless gulches and neared the heart of the rocky ridge.

Later, came other horsemen along the same paths. They rode with speed, and one constantly watched the earth beneath. Obviously, they were following the trail, and as both were well armed, they seemed likely to do damage to the kidnappers, if the latter could be overtaken.

The pursuers were Round-up Rube and Mark Jeffords.

The scheme of abduction had not been a complete success. A young girl had seen the kidnappers taking their prey away, and she had given the alarm just in time for Rube to take charge. He had reappeared, and the zeal with which he took the trail was commendable.

"The trail freshens!" he observed, to Jeffords.

"We are well mounted, and, if we can have time enough before nightfall, we are bound to run them down."

"And then for a fight!" the secretary returned.

"I'm willing to fight such knaves."

"And I, too."

"From the description I am almost sure that I recognize two of the party. If so, they are of the worst kind."

"Then we may expect to get received warmly."

"Yes."

"I'm not a professional fighter, but I think we are good for them."

"Good! I admire your pluck."

Marshall spoke with the self-forgetfulness of one who had seen long service in the wildest part of the West. To him it was nothing that he was liable to have an encounter. He did not covet it, but it was not to be avoided if one was to be a border detective.

They were passing along the side of a ridge. Rocks and bushes were around them in profusion, and they could not see far in advance. Each new view broke abruptly upon the gaze.

Thus it was that the first sight of a human being was unheralded, and they were within a few yards of him before conscious of the fact. They turned around a rocky point and saw before them a small level space. At the further side was a perpendicular rock which assumed almost the proportions of a cliff.

By the cliff was a man, his back being toward the horsemen. He faced the rock, and one hand was raised and resting against it. His occupation would have been mysterious had not his hand moved in irregular lines, like that of one engaged in writing.

And above his head two words stood out in black on the almost-white surface—

"SAVE US!"

It was a peculiar inscription, and the man was, to all appearance, alone.

The detective loosened his lasso, while Jeffords gazed in wonder.

"Here is one of the tribe!" the Round-up Detective declared, "but what means this jugglery?"

He intended to wait and see, but Mark's horse became uneasy and pounded his foot heavily upon the ground. The rock-writer turned suddenly, and revealed the face of Sim Soden.

It was a surprise, and he could do no more than stare in alarm, but Rube rode quickly to his side.

"Well, knave, what are you doing?" he demanded.

"Nothin'," Sim faltered.

"Nothing! Why do you write on the rock? 'Save us!' Save whom?"

"'Twas only idle sport," muttered the rough.

"You speak falsely, and you know it. Where are your companions? Where are Landgrove and his daughter?"

"I don't know no sech persons."

"Beware!" Rube retorted. "We will not endure any prevarication; come to the point at once. You were of the party, and you will obey us or take the consequences."

"But I—"

"What means the writing on the rock?" Rustler Rube demanded, imperiously.

Soden shifted his position uneasily.

"Ef I'd finished, it was ter lead ye astray," he admitted.

"And where are your companions and the prisoners?"

"Gone thar," and Sim pointed ahead.

"Guide us to them, and mind that you do it faithfully. We are not to be trifled with, and you will attempt treachery at your peril. Do you hear?"

"Yes," Sim gloomily replied.

"Lead on!"

The fellow stood inactive for a few moments, looking around furtively, and seeming to be in distress of mind.

"Come on!" he said, at last, sullenly.

He started and they followed, holding their weapons ready for use. A deep canyon was entered, the bed of which was more or less littered with dead leaves which had fallen from the trees above.

The detective's gaze was not upon the ground, but there lay the greatest danger. His horse's footing suddenly gave way, and horse and rider sunk into the earth.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE NIGHT-CAMP.

THE danger had come suddenly, and from an unexpected quarter. The horsemen had made no preparation for it, but, in the case of one of their number, preparation would have done no good when once he was over the treacherous spot.

It was a trap set long before by Soden and Flint. The canyon was the only direct approach to their rude home, and, fearing pursuit, they had made travel there unsafe.

In the bed of the canyon was a hole, the depth of which they had never sounded. Across this they had laid dry, slender limbs, and covered them over with leaves. On this occasion it served them well.

Rube tried in vain to escape from the pit.

In vain, for, before he could fully clear the saddle, he and his horse had passed below the surface of the ground. Down they went into darkness, and the ex-cowboy tried in vain to seize upon something firm and reliable.

The fall seemed to last for ages, and many thoughts flashed through his mind as he went. Providence had not deserted him in that hour. Twice he caught, by chance, at points of rock, which checked his descent for a moment; twice he struck upon sloping shelves of rock, which had the same effect.

When he finally came to a full stop, it was with a shock which jarred, but did not injure him.

Once there he stood still, not daring to stir lest he fall again. Where was he? He looked up, but no ray of light met his gaze. All was utter darkness.

Having a good supply of matches he lighted

one. It showed him a rocky shaft above and darkness around, and showed what was of far greater value—on the ground, at his feet, were three or four blackened torches; plainly, those ignited by some one, and thrown into the hole in a spirit of investigation.

He made haste to light one, and succeeded without trouble. He then saw that firm footing was beneath him, and that he was in what seemed to be a corridor of Nature, fifty feet wide, and nearly as high. It extended, as he afterward found, north and south.

There was another discovery. Near him lay his horse, seemingly dead, but when he started to make an examination, the animal bounded up and shook himself in a hearty way which was very promising.

The zigzag walls of the pit had saved him as they saved Rube, breaking the force of the fall.

The ex-cowboy began to feel more cheerful. He saw that he could not climb up where he had come down, and knew that Jeffords had no rope to aid him, but the corridor was promising; it ought to have an outlet somewhere.

It was against this hope that the canyon above was very deep, and the corridor below the canyon. Thus, he must be very near the base of the mountainous ridge, but that did not discourage him. Having shouted in vain to Jeffords several times, he resolved to act for himself, and, having provided himself with an extra torch, he set out, with the horse following him like a dog.

The result proved that he was in a natural tunnel of no mean nature. Its course was direct, and, at times, the rocky walls were as clean-cut as if made by hand—sure evidence of a former convulsion of Nature. In other places its sides were very irregular, and the width varied, but at any point a dozen horsemen could have ridden abreast.

For a mile the way was thus open; then it terminated in a wall of solid rock.

He had no choice but to turn back and try the other end, so he mounted the horse and rode at a gallop. He was in great fear for Rachel, but it did no good to worry.

Reaching the point where he had fallen, he found the situation unchanged, and went on as rapidly as was prudent. The tunnel continued as regular as ever, with a foundation of hard earth.

He estimated that he had gone as far north—such proved to be his present course, though he had not been able to decide on the points of the compass—as he had gone south previously, when he suddenly emerged from the tunnel.

A ravine was before him, and earth and sky were covered with the mantle of night.

Where he was he had no means of knowing, but it could not be far from the northern side of the hills. He stood in uncertainty, looking to the right and left, and feeling almost hopeless when he thought of Rachel. Hours had passed since he fell into the tunnel, and he had no means of knowing the whereabouts of either Jeffords or the party they had pursued.

Suddenly his attention was attracted by a dim light off the right, and he went toward it, leading his horse.

Not far had he progressed when he reached an elevated part of the ravine, and, looking down a slope, he saw a camp-fire. Human beings were grouped around it, and he started as he saw that one was a woman.

A second glance he gave, and then he recognized Rachel.

He had found the camp of the abductors.

A dry twig cracked under pressure near him. He wheeled and saw a man, but only one glance was necessary to make him drop his hand from the revolver to which it had quickly moved.

"Jeffords!" he exclaimed, in hearty pleasure.

"Upon my word, this beats the record!" the secretary declared. "Why, I thought you dead."

"I only fell into a natural shaft."

"Didn't you hear me call to you?"

"No."

"It's not strange. A good deal of earth caved in with you, torn down by your horse's feet."

"It probably lodged midway, preventing us from hearing each other."

"Soden improved the chance to desert, and I have had a hard struggle to follow the abductors alone, inexperienced as I was. When night came I was all at fault, and it was only chance that I discovered yonder camp."

"Who is there?"

"Mr. Landgrove and Rachel."

"Who else?"

"Three men in rags, including Soden, and, besides, Dick Beech."

"Ahl! he's in worthy company. Jeffords, they are four to our two, but we must make immediate attack."

"I'm with you!" Mark replied, promptly.

"Come, then! Those men are outlaws, and it would be folly to show them more mercy than they are showing Landgrove and his daughter. Don't hesitate to use your revolver."

They crept toward the camp. Soden and Flint were asleep, while Dick Beech and the mysterious leader in rags talked earnestly together.

Rube crawled so near that he could almost

touch the abductors, and then whistled to Mark. Together they sprung into the camp.

According to the plan laid by the ex-cowboy, Jeffords went straight to Landgrove's side, released him and gave him a revolver, but Rube was there to fight, and he fought from the first. His opening stroke was to fell the unknown man in rags, and then he set upon Dick Beech with energy.

The camp saw lively scenes in the next few moments, but the result was never in doubt. Soden and Flint evinced rank cowardice and yielded without striking a blow. The others stood up well for a time, but the disadvantage of a surprise was with them, and, when a few shots had been fired, they fled into the darkness.

Although pursued they made good their escape. Rube hastened to get the rescued persons to a safer place, where they would not be subject to secret attack, or a treacherous shot from the darkness. Soden and Flint were prisoners.

Landgrove shook hands with the rescuers and thanked them again and again, exhibiting a degree of childishness which indicated that trouble had temporarily impaired his mind. When he was more composed, he observed:

"I can't conceive why we were abducted."

Rube took a paper from his pocket, unfolded and held it before the old gentleman.

"Read that, and you may be able to surmise," he responded, sententiously.

Landgrove obeyed, and grew excited as he went on.

"What's this?" he cried. "A paper signed by Ash, Tillotson and Flanders, by which they agree to defraud the stockholders of the Sacred Comet, collect all the money they can, and then run away with it!"

"Even so. Mr. Landgrove, you have put your faith in men of the worst stripe. Not for a moment have they expected to finish the canal, but it was their scheme to get in all the money they could, and then skip with it. They have sounded you and found you honest, and the result was this abduction. If they had been allowed their own way you would have died in these mountains, and then they would have been sole guardians—with an apology to the term—of the corporation capital. As for this compact, it was drawn up because, rascal-like, they did not trust even each other, and sought to bind all to the compact."

Landgrove was silent with amazement.

Rube saw Jeffords looking at the paper in great wonder, and smiled as he remembered the secretary's unavailing efforts to secure it on a former occasion.

"Now, do you know who was the leader of the kidnappers?" the detective added.

"No. He was very silent."

"He feared you would recognize his voice. It was Sidney Tillotson!"

"Tillotson!"

"That very man; the arch-plotter of all. Ash was bad enough, but he was old; it was Tillotson who had the youth, the brains and the power to do the greatest damage. He has been the evil genius of the plot!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE ROUND UP OF THE DETECTIVE.

Two men staggered along a gulch. One was strong enough, but he supported another who was weak, pallid and blood-stained. They were Dick Beech and Sidney Tillotson, the latter still disguised in his costume of rags.

The sun was an hour high.

Tillotson paused, wavered and sunk down.

"I can go no further," he gasped, "and there is no reason why I should. I am dying!"

"Brace up!" Dick answered, with rude sympathy. "You're all right, an' I'll bring you around when we git ter the cave."

"Useless!" was the faint reply. "I'm a dying man. I feel it in every way. Look ye," he added, with more strength, "I want to leave you a debt of vengeance."

"Who on?"

"Landgrove and Marshall."

The boatman clinched his brown hands.

"I'll do it, willin'ly!" he agreed.

"Listen, and you shall know the whole story. I'll feel better if I tell it to some one. I killed Amos Smith!"

"You did?" uttered Dick, in amazement.

"Yes. If I told it at the town it would not surprise them so much, perhaps, for I suspect that the cursed detective is onto the secret. Hear this:

"Ash, Flanders and I never intended to construct the Sacred Comet; it was our game to gather in all the cash we could, and then skip with it. We joined Landgrove, pretended to be with him, but when delicate sounding showed that he could not be brought over, determined to go it alone.

"Then came Smith. He regarded the case from a view of Landgrove only, but made up his mind it was a swindle. He bade fair to ruin all. Ash, Flanders and I held a meeting and agreed to abduct Smith, but I afterward changed the plan.

"I went near Landgrove's house, skulked in the garden and stabbed Smith.

"It was my first great crime, and terror then seized upon me. Confused and uncertain, I

dropped the fatal knife and fled without it. How it got into Smith's room, I don't know."

"But I do," interrupted Beech. "At an early hour the next mornin' Sally Hooks, my aunt, walked in the garding. She found the dead man an' the knife. I had a knife jest like it, an' she, knowin' it, thought I'd done the deed. She took the knife, anxious ter hide it an' save me, but lost her head, an' in bewildered terror carried it to the house. She heard some one in the hall, while she still held it, an' she slipped inter Smith's own room an' hid it under the bureau, under the impulse o' the minute. She told me this!"

"I see," Tillotson answered. "That knife, by the way, I found strangely. Some weeks ago I took the fancy to descend Barrel Sink, which I did, alone. At the bottom I found that knife. But let me hasten on."

"No one suspected me of killing Amos Smith. I had always pretended to be a jovial, honest fellow, and I kept up the part."

"When Rustler Rube came I did not suspect his double life, as you have revealed it to me; but I did soon see that he was a rival in my suit for Rachel's hand. I pretended friendship for both, but my heart burned with secret hatred, and I saw that I should have to remove him. I have twice tried."

"The first time was at Barrel Sink. I saw him go down, and it put me in a panic. Why? If, in my terror of mind, I left something behind when I killed Smith, I also took something away which was not mine. I saw a handkerchief on the ground by Smith's body, took it and fled, only to see, later, that it bore Malachi Landgrove's name."

"Being near Barrel Sink when I found out whose the red-stained thing was, I flung it down Barrel Sink. You see now why I hated to have Rube search there. I dropped a boulder down, but he escaped all injury."

"I again attempted his life at the bear-hunt. When others fired upon the grizzly, I took a shot at Marsh. I missed. Then I crossed the ravine secretly, showed myself on his side, and he did not suspect me—not then, though I think he did, later."

"The fellow certainly got an inkling of the truth. He learned, too, of a certain compact signed by me, Ash and Flanders, and suspected that 'twas at the court-house. We had lost this compact. Ash thought he had burned it; we learned that he had burned the wrong paper, and were alarmed. I studied out that it must be at the court-house, and went there to get it. The detective and Ball were already there, and I was nearly caught while trying to break in."

"That is my story, and I ask you to stop only to bury me decently, and then seek revenge on Marshall."

"I'll do it!" Beech declared.

"He may bear a charmed life, though; I've tried it twice in vain."

"Somebody else tried it. Kate Graham loved Mark Jeffords, but thought that he killed Smith. Bound ter save him, she crept inter Perkins's chamber an', as he lay asleep, stabbed at him. She failed ter kill him—how, I don't know; though I suspect thar was a dummy in the bed. Kate told me all this."

"It matters not; only do the work thoroughly, yourself. Now, let me die in peace."

"Your time is not yet come!"

It was a stern voice that uttered the last words, and Rube Marshall suddenly stepped from a thicket, followed by Jeffords, Landgrove and Rachel.

Dick Beech started up belligerently, but Rube's revolver covered him, and, though he blustered a good deal, he was forced to surrender.

Rube turned to Tillotson, who was glaring with vigor surprising in a dying man.

"I have one cause to thank you," Marshall declared; "you have made confession before an abundance of witnesses. Much of this I had studied out, as I have been explaining to Landgrove, but I could not have told it as clearly as you have made it known. You baffled and deceived me a long time, Tillotson, for your words and face were fair, but you had to come under the harrow."

"I'll live to be revenged on you!" Sidney cried, vehemently.

"We will see."

"I want to explain one thing," observed Landgrove. "The knife which Tillotson got out of Barrel Sink, and with which he killed Smith, was doubtless mine. I bought it of Naveddo Luque, the juggler, but grew ashamed of my possession and flung it into Barrel Sink."

Just then he caught Dick Beech's gaze.

"This man," he continued, "once claimed to be my son. I denied it but feebly then, for I knew his powers of mischief and wished to delay action until the canal danger was over, but I assert now that he spoke with utter falsity."

"So he has said to me," Rube replied. "He has admitted that he knows his father to have been one 'Rocky' Magrath. He has also admitted that he lied when he said that he saw you in the garden, that fatal evening of Smith's death."

The boatman ground his teeth, but said nothing; it was maddening to think how he had poured out his secret to Rube, as "R. Marsh."

Mark Jeffords stepped forward.

"As this is an era of statements, I have a confession to make," he remarked. "Mr. Landgrove, I have not acted an honorable part in your household. I was a reporter on a New York daily newspaper, and, as such, was sent here to get the truth in regard to the Sacred Comet. I entered your service simply to further my end. I confess that I suspected fraud, but, zealous as I was, I never let my judgment be warped; this is my only claim on your forgiveness. It is known that I disliked to have Smith go East and make his report. Why? Simply because I had not yet obtained my own evidence, and, with a reporter's zeal, was anxious to be the first to tell the truth. I felt that it was dishonorable in me to enter your house with a secret purpose, as I did, but I was trying to obey my employers and get news."

"I forgive you," Landgrove sighed. "What matters it now, since the Sacred Comet is ruined?"

"Don't be downhearted," Rube hastened to encourage. "There is a way out of your trouble. You have wanted to connect, by railroad or canal, with the Northern Pacific Railroad. Why didn't you work north instead of east?"

"Because there are over two miles of mountainous ridge there, and the cost of a tunnel would be too much, in comparison with the resources of our valley."

"Thank fortune, I can remove the obstacle. It was a lucky tumble I took when I ran into Sim Soden's trap, for I fell into a natural tunnel, wide, high, straight as an arrow—a rent made by Nature in the base of the hills—and two miles long. There is the channel you wish for, not for a canal, but for a railroad; and the cost of it will be small. Thank Heaven, if I have seemed to err, I can make some recompense!"

He looked at Rachel as he spoke, and the appealing look in his eyes brought her swiftly to his side.

"Nobly have you atoned!" she replied, in a tremulous voice. "You have saved my father and me from the kidnappers; you have proved him not a conspirator in the Sacred Comet project; you have proved him innocent of Amos Smith's death; and now you reveal the fact of the natural tunnel. Nobly, I say, you have atoned!"

"I thank you, Rachel!" he made answer, unsteadily. "Later, we will talk further, and I will try to prove that no unworthy motive has ever actuated me in this case, and that I would have surrendered this case, and resigned from my profession, rather than bring sorrow to you! But that is not now necessary; all will end well!"

All did end well.

Tillotson was found to be not fatally injured. He was carried to Red Lake on a litter, and, in due time, was brought to trial, convicted, and dealt with by the law. He lies in an unmarked grave outside of Red Lake.

As Pomeroy Ash had not known of the murder before it was done, he was allowed to go free, in consideration of his age, after making confession. He fled to Canada.

Flanders partially recovered, but was never able to do further work, and soon died. For the assault upon him Dick Beech received a long term in prison, where he has recently lost his life by fever.

Mrs. Hooks and Kate Graham were informed that their room was better than their company, and put upon a train bound for the Pacific Slope. No more is known of them.

Jeffords and Mazette were married, and went to San Francisco to reside. Her past having been proved blameless, Mark thought he had gained a treasure in her—and he was right. He is now a prominent editor in the metropolis of the Pacific Coast, and both he and his wife find only happiness in life.

The Sacred Comet was abandoned, and, after all share-owners had been satisfied, the railroad scheme of the north ridge took its place. The natural tunnel was found to be all that Rube Marshall had claimed; the expense was found to be comparatively small; the valley obtained direct connection with the larger railroads; and Malachi Landgrove found money pouring into his pockets with a rush.

The Round-up Detective was superintendent of all Landgrove's interests, having resigned from detective pursuits.

From this it will be seen that he was wholly forgiven. He had a talk with Rachel, in which all his troubles of those dark days were made known, and—she, loving him, would not have been a woman had she not forgiven him. And she declared, in the same breath, that he had never done anything for which to be forgiven!

The marriage which followed was quite in the natural order of events, and Mrs. Rachel Marshall makes a wonderfully interesting matron, now.

Rube and Landgrove are getting rich together, and each is proud of the other. One roof shelters both, and Jimmy Rob, cook for the family, now declares that the world is a new world since the days when he served the Odds-and-Ends Pirates, and the Sacred Comet was deep in the waters of tribulation.

THE END.

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